MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

JANUARY
35 CENTS

"EPITAPH" by
Erskine Caldwell
Author of
"God's Little Acre"

Also—

HAL ELLSON
JOHN D. MAC DONALD
HELEN NIELSEN
RICHARD DEMING
—and others

EVERY STORY NEW!

A Complete Novel by EVAN HUNTER

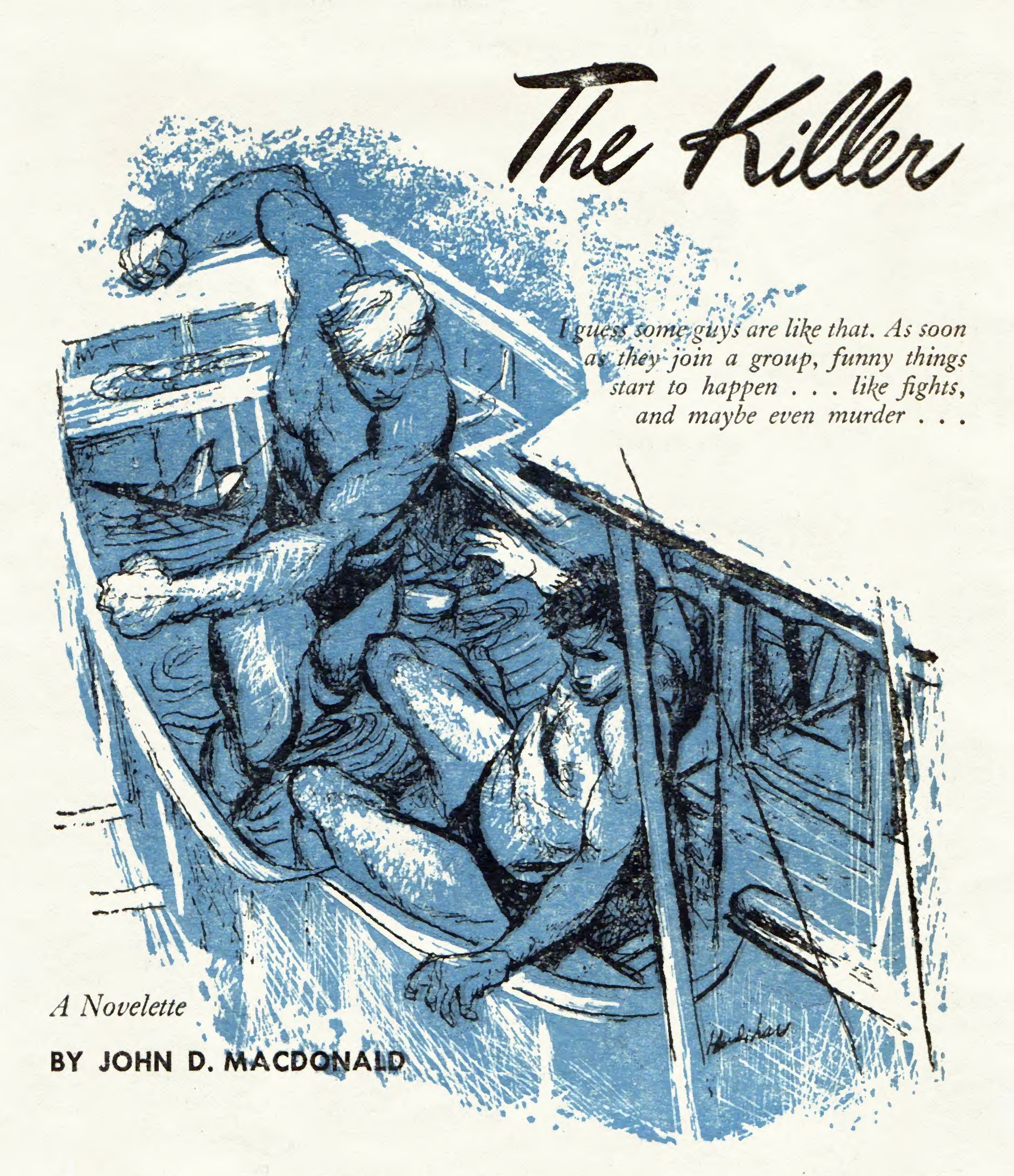
VOL. 3, NO. 1 JANUARY, 1955

MANHUNT

CONTENTS

MANHUNT VOLUME 3, NUMBER 1, January, 1955. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, $4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., (an affiliate of the St. John Publishing Co.), 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H.

The Killer



I guess some guys are like that. As soon as they join a group, funny things start to happen . . . like fights, and maybe even murder . . .

A Novelette

BY JOHN D. MACDONALD

WE CERTAINLY got sick of John Lash. A lot of the guys stopped coming after he started to attend every meeting. It's a skin diving club — you know, just a few guys who like to swim under water in masks and all, shoot fish with those spear guns, all that. We started originally with six guys and we called ourselves The Deep Six. Even when it got up to about fifteen, we kept the name.

When it started we just had masks and fins and crude rigs. We live and

work on the Florida Keys. I work in a garage in Marathon. Dusty has a bait and boat rental business in Craig. Lew manages a motel down on Ramrod. That's just to give you an idea of the kind of jokers we are. Just guys who got bitten by this skin diving bug. We tried to meet once a week. Dusty had an old tub that's ideal for it. We meet and pick a spot and head for it and anchor and go down and see what's there. You never know what you'll find. There are holes down there that are crawling with fish.

Once the bug gets you, you're hooked. There are a lot of little clubs like ours. Guys that get along. Guys who like to slant down through that green country, kicking yourself along with your fins, hunting those big fish right down in their own backyard.

We got better equipment as we went along. We bought snorkel tubes when those came out. But the Aqua-lungs were beyond our price range. I think it was Lew who had the idea of everybody chipping in, and of putting in the money we got from selling the catches. When we had enough we bought a lung and two tanks, and then another. In between meetings somebody would run the four tanks up and get them refilled. There was enough time on the tanks so that during a full day everybody got a crack at using one of the lungs.

It was fine there for quite a while. We'd usually get ten or twelve, and some of the wives would come along. We'd have food and beer out there in the sun on that old tub and we had some excitement, some danger, and a lot of fish.

Croy Danton was about the best. A little guy with big shoulders, who didn't have much to say. Not a gloomy guy. He just didn't talk much. His wife, Betty, would usually come along when she could. They've got some rental units at Marathon. He did a lot of the building himself, with the help of a G.I. loan. Betty is what I would call a beautiful girl. She's a blonde and almost the same height as Croy, and you can look at her all day without finding anything wrong with her. She dives a little.

Like I said, it was fine there for a while, until Lew brought this John Lash along one day. Afterward Lew said he was sorry, that Lash had seemed like a nice guy. In all fairness to Lew, I will admit that the first time John Lash joined us he seemed okay. We let him pay his dues. He was new to the Keys. He said he was looking around, and he had a temporary job tending bar.

One thing about him, he was certainly built. One of those guys who looks as if he was fat when you see him in clothes. But in his swimming trunks he looked like one of those advertisements. He had a sort of smallish round head and round face and not much neck. He was blonde and beginning to go a little bald. The head didn't seem to fit the rest

of him, all that tough brown bulge of muscle. He looked as if a meat axe would bounce right off him. He'd come over from California and he had belonged to a couple of clubs out there and had two West Coast records. He said he had those records and we didn't check, but I guess he did. He certainly knew his way around in the water.

This part is hard to explain. Maybe you have had it happen to you. Like at a party. You're having a good time, a lot of laughs, and then somebody joins the party and it changes everything. You still laugh, but it isn't the same kind of laugh. Everything is different. Like one of those days when the sun is out and then before you know it there is a little haze across the sun and everything looks sort of funny. The water looks oily and the colors are different. That is what John Lash did to The Deep Six. It makes you wonder what happened to a guy like that when he was a kid. It isn't exactly a competitive instinct. They seem to be able to guess just how to rub everybody the wrong way. But you can't put your finger on it. Any of us could tell Dusty his old tub needed a paint job and the bottom scraped and Dusty would say we should come around and help if we were so particular. But John Lash could say it in such a way that it would make Dusty feel ashamed and make the rest of us feel ashamed, as though we were all second rate, and John Lash was used to things being first rate.

When he kidded you he rubbed you raw. When he talked about himself it wasn't bragging because he could always follow it up. He liked horseplay. He was always roughing somebody around, laughing to show it was all in fun, but you had the feeling he was right on the edge of going crazy mad and trying to kill you. We had been a close group, but after he joined we started to give each other a bad time, too. There were arguments and quarrels that John Lash wasn't even in. But they happened because he was there. It was spoiling the way it used to be, and there just wasn't anything we could do about it because it wasn't the sort of club where you can vote people out.

Without the lung, with just the mask, he could stay downstairs longer than anybody. Longer than Croy Danton even, and Croy had been the best until John Lash showed up. We had all tried to outdo Croy, but it had been sort of a gag competition. When we tried to outdo John Lash some of the guys stayed down so long that they were pretty sick when they came back up. But nobody beat him.

Another thing about him I didn't like. Suppose we'd try a place and find nothing worth shooting. For John Lash there wasn't anything that wasn't worth shooting. He had to come up with a fish. I've seen him down there, waving the shiny barb slowly back and forth. The fish come up to take a look at it. A

thing like that attracts them. An angel fish or a parrot fish or a lookdown would come up and hang right in front of the barb, studying this strange shiny thing. Then John Lash would pull the trigger. There would be a big gout of bubbles and sometimes the spear would go completely through the fish so that it was threaded on the line like a big bright bead. He'd come up grinning and pull it off and toss it over the side and say, "Let's try another spot, children."

The group shrunk until we were practically down to the original six. Some of the other guys were going out on their own, just to stay away from John Lash. Croy Danton kept coming, and most of the time he would bring Betty. John Lash never horsed around with Croy. Croy, being so quiet, never gave anybody much of an opening. John Lash never paid any special attention to Betty. But I saw it happen. Betty wasn't going to dive after fish. She was just going to take a dip to cool off. John Lash had just taken a can of beer out of the ice chest. He had opened it and it was a little bit warm. I saw him glance up to the bow where Betty was poised to dive. She stood there and then dived off cleanly. John Lash sat there without moving, just staring at the place where she had been. And the too-warm beer foamed out of the can and ran down his fingers and dropped onto his thigh, darkening and matting the coarse blonde hair that had been sundried since his last dive. I saw him drain the can and saw him close his big hand on it, crumpling it, before throwing it over the side. And I saw him watch Betty climb back aboard, sleek and wet, smiling at Croy, her hair waterpasted down across one eye so that as soon as she stood up in the boat, she thumbed it back behind her ear.

I saw all that and it gave me a funny feeling in my stomach. It made me think of the way he would lure the lookdowns close to the barb, and it made me think of the way blood spreads in the water.

After that, John Lash began to move in on Betty with all the grace and tact of a bulldozer. He tried to dab at her with a towel when she came out of the water. If she brought anything up, he had to bustle over to take it off her spear. He found reasons to touch her. Imaginary bugs. Helping her in or out of the boat. Things like that. And all the time his eyes burning in his head.

At first you could see that Croy and Betty had talked about it between meetings, and they had agreed, I guess, to think of it as being sort of amusing. At least they exchanged quick smiles when John Lash was around her. But a thing like that cannot stay amusing very long when the guy on the make keeps going just a little bit further each time. It got pretty tense and, after the worst day, Croy started leaving Betty home. He left her home for two weeks in a row.

Croy left her home the third week and John Lash didn't show up either. We sat on the dock waiting for latecomers. We waited longer than usual. Dusty said, "I saw Lash at the bar yesterday and he said today he was off."

There were only five of us. The smallest in a long, long time. We waited. Croy finally said, "Well, let's go." As we took the boat out I saw Croy watching the receding dock, no expression on his face. It was a funny strained day. I guess we were all thinking the same thing. We had good luck, but it didn't seem to matter. We left earlier than usual. Croy sat in the bow all the way back, as if in that way he'd be nearer shore, and the first one home.

2.

Croy came around to see me at the garage the next morning. I was trying to find a short in an old Willys. When I turned around he was standing there behind me with a funny look on his face. Like a man who's just heard a funny sound in the distance and can't figure out just what it was. He looked right over my left shoulder, and said, "You can tell him for me, Dobey, that I'm going to kill him."

"What do you mean?"

"He came around yesterday. He was a little drunk. He scared Betty. He knew I wouldn't be there. He came around and he scared her. The Sandersons were there. She got loose of him and went over where they were. He kept hanging around. She had to stay with them most of the day. He's got her nervous now. You tell him for me if he makes one more little bit of a move toward her at any time, I'll sure kill him stone dead." He turned around and walked out with that funny look still on his face. It was the most I ever heard him say all at one time.

At noon I went over to the bar where John Lash was working. He'd just come on. I got a beer and he rung it up and slapped my change down. He seemed a little nervous.

"Get anything yesterday?"

"Les got a big 'cuda. Croy got some nice grouper. Where were you?"

"Oh, I had things to do."

"You better not have any more things like that to do."

He looked at me and put his big hands on the bar and put his face closer to mine. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"Don't try to get tough with me. You messed around Betty Danton yesterday. You scared her. She told Croy. Croy came in this morning and gave me a message to give you. He says you bother her in any other kind of way at any time and he's going to kill you." It sounded funny to say it like that. As if I was in a movie.

John Lash just stared at me out of those little hot eyes of his. "What kind of talk is that? Kill me? With

all the come-on that blonde of his has been giving me? Why don't he come here and tell me that? You know damn well why he didn't come here. By God, I'd have thrown him halfway out to the road."

"He told me to tell you. It sounded like he meant it."

"I'm scared to death. Look at me shake."

I finished my beer and put the glass down. "See you," I said.

"I'll be along the next time."

I walked out. One thing about that Lash, he didn't scare worth a damn. I would have been scared. One of those fellows who do a lot of talking wouldn't scare me much. But the quiet ones, like Croy, they bottle things up.

It was nearly three o'clock when Betty came into the garage. She had on a white dress and when she stood there it made the old garage with all the grease and dirt look darker than ever before. She is a girl who looks right at you. Her eyes were worried. I wiped my hands and lit a cigarette and went over to her.

"Dobey, did Croy talk to you?"

"He was in."

"What did he say?"

"Wouldn't he tell you what he said?"

"He just said he gave you a message for John Lash. What was it, Dobey? He won't tell me. He acts so funny. I'm scared, Dobey."

"He told me to tell Lash if he messed around you he was going to kill him. He said Lash scared you."

"Well, he did scare me, sort of. Because he was drunk. But the Sandersons were there. So it was all right. Croy says I have to come along with you next time. What did Lash say?"

"What do you think he said? You can't scare him off that way. I don't think anybody ought to go out next time, Betty. I think we ought to call it off. I think it's going to be a mess."

"Croy says we're going. He's acting funny. We'll have to go. You've got to come along too, Dobey. Please."

3.

That's the way it was. It was something you couldn't stop. Like one of those runaway trains in the old movie serials. Picking up speed as it went. I had time during the week to get hold of the other guys and tell them what was up. I don't know now why we didn't form a sort of delegation and go see John Lash and tell him to move along, off the Keys. There would have been enough of us. But there was something about Lash. Something wild and close to the surface. You could have done all that to a normal guy, but he wasn't normal. I'm not saying he was crazy.

Anyway, I loaded the little Jap automatic I had brought back from Saipan and put it in the paper sack with my lunch. That's the way I felt about the day.

Dusty and Lew and I were the first ones to arrive. We put the gear in the old tub. Lew had gotten his new Arbalete gun with the double sling and we hefted it and admired it and then we talked about maybe getting our own compressor some time for the two double-tank lungs. I crushed a damp cigarette and rubbed the glass on my face mask. Two more of the regulars arrived. There was the feel of trouble in that day. A different shimmer in the water. A different blue in the sky. A car door slammed and pretty soon Croy and Betty came around the corner of the fish house and down to the dock, laden with gear. For a time I guess we were all hoping that John Lash wouldn't show. It would have been a good day then, like the days before he came along and joined us.

But as hope grew stronger and Dusty started to fool with the old engine, John Lash came down to the dock, walking cat-light, carrying his sack of gear and lunch and beer, his personal Saetta gun in his other hand, looking slimmer and frailer than it was because it was John Lash who carried it, walking toward us, sun picking sweat-lights off his brown shoulders.

I expected it right then and there. I saw Betty hunch herself a little closer to Croy and start to put her hand on his arm and then change her mind. But John Lash came aboard, saying a lot of loud hellos, banging his gear down, opening the ice chest to pile his cans of beer in there. He didn't seem to pay any special attention to Betty, or Croy either. He sat on the rail back near Dusty at the wheel while we headed out and down the coast. It was enough to make you want to relax, but you couldn't. The water had a greased look. We had agreed to try Gilman's Reef. There is good coral there, and rock holes. I don't know whether we were trying to keep a lid on trouble, but the other five of us did more talking than usual, more kidding around. But laughter had a flat sound across the water. Lew checked the Aqua Lungs. I had me a beer.

When we got close I went up and stood on the bow and had Dusty bring it up to a place that looked right. I let the anchor line slide through my hands. It hit bottom in twenty-five feet, which was about right. We drifted back and it caught and we swung and steadied there, about twenty feet off the reef shallows. No trouble had started and it didn't look like there would be any. Croy and Lew went down first, Lew with a lung and Croy with a mask only, just to take a look around. I noticed that when Croy lowered himself easily into the water he glanced at Betty and then back to where John Lash was working his feet into the fins. He ducked under and one fin swirled the water as he went down.

John Lash got his fins on and flapped forward to where Betty sat on the rail. He laughed out loud and wrapped a big brown fist in that

blonde hair of hers and turned her face upward and kissed her hard on the mouth. She struggled and clawed at him and fell to her hands and knees when he released her.

"Hard to get, aren't you, blondie?" he asked.

Dusty said, "Cut it out, Lash. Cut it out!"

"This is nothing to you, Dusty. Keep out of it! This is me and Betty."

"Get away from me," she said. Her eyes were funny and her mouth had a broken look. I picked up the paper sack and put my hand inside and got hold of the automatic. I couldn't tell what he was going to try to do. He stood spreadlegged on the deck watching the water. Betty moved away from him toward the stern, beyond me and Dusty.

Croy broke water and shoved his mask up. He was a dozen feet from the boat.

John Lash stood there and laughed down at him and said, "I just kissed your woman, Danton. I understand you got ideas of making something out of it. I got a message from you."

Croy took one glance at Betty. He brought the Arbalete spear gun up almost off-hand and fired it directly at John Lash's middle. I heard the zing and slap of the rubber slings, heard Betty's scream, heard John Lash's hard grunt of surprise as he threw himself violently to one side. I don't know how he got away from it. But he did. The spear hit the end of the nylon and fell to the water on the far side of the boat. John Lash recovered his balance. He stared at Croy as though he were shocked. He roared then and went off the side in a long flat dive, hurling himself at Croy. There was a splash of water, a flash of brown arms and then they were both gone. I got a glimpse of them under the water as they sank out of sight. Betty screamed again, not as loud.

4.

Nobody was set to go down. We all started grabbing gear at once. I went off the side about the same moment as Dusty, and at the last moment I had snatched up John Lash's Saetta gun. It was cocked and I don't know what I expected to do with it but I took it. I went down through the deepening shades of green, looking for them. I saw movement and cut over toward it, but it was Lew wearing the lung. He saw me and spread his arms in a gesture that meant he hadn't spotted anything worth shooting. He didn't know what was going on. I motioned him to go up. I guess I looked as though I meant it. He shrugged and headed up.

I looked hard, but I couldn't find them and I could tell by the way my chest felt that it was nearly time to head up. I took it as long as I could. I thought I saw movement below me and to the right but I was close to blacking out and I went up. Dusty was hanging on the

side of the boat. Betty stood staring down into the water. I knew from her face that they hadn't come up. I took deep breaths and turned and went down again and got part way down when I saw them. John Lash with a look of agony on his face, was working his way up, kicking hard, one hand holding Croy by the waistband of his trunks. Croy was loose in the water. I went over and got hold of Croy by the wrist. I fired the spear off to the side so the gun would float up. Lash was having a hard time of it. I got Croy up and we got him over the side and put him face down on the bottom and Les, who had the lung and tanks off, began to work on him. Somebody behind me helped John Lash aboard. Dusty had to grab Betty and pull her away from Croy so Les could use the artificial respiration without her getting in his way.

She turned against Dusty and she was crying. Those were the sounds. The small noises she made, and John Lash's labored breathing, and the rhythmic slap and creak of the respiration.

"Tried . . . to kill me," Lash said. "You . . . you saw it. Then . . . tried to drown me. Tried to hold me even . . . after he'd passed out."

Nobody answered him. The boat moved in the offshore swell. Loose gear rattled. Croy retched and coughed. Les continued until Croy began to struggle weakly. Les moved back then and Croy rolled over, closing his eyes against the sun.

Betty dropped to her knees beside him saying words that did not make sentences. Croy raised his head. He looked at her and then pushed her aside, gently. He got to his knees. I tried to help him up but he refused the help. He got to his feet with an enormous effort. He stood unsteadily and looked around until he saw John Lash. As soon as he saw Lash he bent and picked up a loose spear. He held it by the middle, the muscles of his arm bunching.

John Lash moved quickly. He got up and said, "Wait! Hold it! Croy, wait . . ." Dusty tried to grab Croy but he moved quickly. The spear tip gashed John Lash's arm as he tried to fend it off, and as Croy drew back to thrust again, John Lash hit him flush in the face with one of those big brown fists. Croy bounced back and hit the engine hatch and rebounded to fall heavily and awkwardly, unconscious.

Betty reached him and turned him and sat, his head in her lap, arm curled protectively around his head, murmuring to him. Lew wet the end of a towel and gave it to her. She wiped the blood from his mouth and looked at John Lash and then the rest of us with cold hate. "Why didn't you stop him? Why are you letting him do this to Croy?"

"I had to hit him!" John Lash said, his voice a half-octave higher than usual. "You saw what he was trying to do. Why didn't you guys stop him?"

Croy's mouth puffed rapidly. He mumbled something. Dusty started the engine. "We better get back. You want to get the anchor up, Dobey?"

I broke it free and hauled it in, coiling the line. When I moved back I saw that Croy was sitting up. Betty was holding onto his arm. She was saying, with a gradually increasing edge in her voice, "No, darling. No. No please, darling."

But Croy was looking beyond her, looking at John Lash. Lash was trying to grin. It wasn't a grin as much as it was just a sort of twist he was wearing on his mouth. He'd look at Croy and then look away. Croy got up then with Betty holding onto him. He lurched over toward the rail and grabbed one of the gaffs. Lash came back up onto his feet quickly and said, "Grab him!"

Croy shook Betty loose. Lew and I grabbed Croy. It was like grabbing hard rubber. He lowered his head and butted Lew over the rail. Dusty swung the boat to keep the prop clear of Lew. It made me lose my balance. As I staggered Croy rapped me across my shins with the handle end of the gaff and hot stars went off behind my eyes from the sudden pain of it. When I could see again I saw him going for Lash with the gaff. They were poised for a moment, muscles like they were cut out of stone, both holding onto the long gaff. Then John Lash, with his greater strength, hurled Croy back toward the stern again. Croy fell, harder than before, but he hadn't been hit.

"Keep him off me!" Lash yelled. "Keep him off me!"

Croy got slowly and clumsily back to his feet and started back toward Lash. I was set to take another grab at Croy. Lew was climbing aboard. The other two guys were having no part of it. They were plain scared. Just as I was about to grab Croy he put his weight on his left foot and went down. I could see the ankle puffing visibly. He never took his eyes off John Lash. He had fallen near his gear. He fumbled and came out with a fish knife with a cork handle. Holding it in his hand he began to crawl toward the bow, toward John Lash again, the handle thumping against the cockpit boards every time he put his right hand down. I fell on his arm. I could hear Lash yelling. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I got Croy's wrist and managed to twist the knife out of his hand. Lew had him around the middle. We hauled him over and tried to sit on him. He kept struggling with stubborn, single-minded strength. Once he broke free and started crawling again toward Lash, puffed lips pulled back from bloody teeth, but we got him again.

Dusty helped that time and one of the other guys and we held him and tried to talk sense into him, but he kept on struggling. We finally got heavy nylon line around his wrists and tied his arms behind him.

We thought that was going to be enough, but even with his hands like that he managed to get on his feet and, limping badly, try to get at Lash. Dusty put a length of the anchor line around the engine hatch and we tied him there around his chest, sitting on the litter of gear and water and smashed sandwiches and cans of beer, staring at John Lash and fighting the heavy line constantly.

5.

Once he was tied up, Betty kneeling beside him, trying to soothe him, John Lash lighted a cigarette. His hands shook. He grinned. "He get like that often?" he asked "Look at him. He still wants to get at me."

Croy's shoulders bulged as he fought the rope. Lash kept glancing at him. We were all breathing hard. Dusty examined skinned knuckles. "I never see him like that, not that bad. Old Croy he gets an idea in his head, you can't get it out. No sir."

"He'll get over this, won't he? When he cools off."

"He's not going to cool off at all," Dusty said. "Not one little bit. Tomorrow, the next day, it'll be just the same."

"What am I supposed to do then?" Lash asked.

"I don't know. I really don't know," Dusty said. "You got to either kill him or he's got it in his mind he's going to kill you. Known him twenty years and he's never gone back on his word one time. Or his daddy before him."

Lash licked his lips. I watched him. I saw him sitting there, nervous. It was something he'd never run into. It was something I guess few men ever run into in their lifetime. I could see him wishing he'd never made any sort of a pass at Betty.

Croy fought the rope, doggedly, constantly, sweat running down his face.

John Lash lighted another cigarette. "He'll get over it," he said unconvincingly.

"I wouldn't want to bet much on that," I said.

There was that big John Lash sitting there in the sun, a whole head and forty-fifty pounds bigger than little Croy Danton. And without the faintest idea in the world as to what to do about it. Either way, there didn't seem to be any kind of an out for John Lash.

"He's nuts. You people are all nuts down here," Lash said.

I sensed what was forming in his mind. I said, "When we dock we'll see if we can hold him right here for about an hour. You ought to pack up and take off."

"Run from a character like him?" Lash said.

Croy's arms came free suddenly and he tried to shove the line up off his chest. His wrists were bloody where the nylon had punished them. Three of us jumped him and got

his wrists tied again. He didn't make a sound. But he fought hard. Betty kept trying to quiet him down, talking gentle, her lips close to his ear. But you could see that for Croy there were two people left in the world. Him and John Lash.

It took about forty minutes to get back in. Nobody talked. I didn't like to watch Croy. It was a sort of thing I have seen in Havana at the cock fights. I hear it is like that, too, at the bull fights. A distillation, I guess you would call it, of violence. The will to kill. Something that comes from a sort of crazy pride, a primitive pride, and once you have started it, you can't turn it off.

It was easy to see that John Lash didn't want to look at him either. But he had to keep glancing at him to make sure he wasn't getting loose. During that forty minutes John Lash slowly unraveled. He came apart way down in the middle of himself where it counted. I don't think any of us would say he was a coward. He wasn't yellow. But this was something he couldn't understand. He'd never faced it before and few men ever face it in their lifetime. To Lash I guess Croy wasn't a man any more. He was a thing that wanted to kill him. A thing that lusted to kill him so badly that even defenseless it would still keep coming at him.

By the time we got in, John Lash wasn't even able to edge by Croy to pick up his gear. We had to get it and pass it up to him where he stood on the dock. John Lash looked down and he looked older in the face. Maybe it was the first time he had seriously thought about his own death. It shrunk him a little.

"Hold him for an hour. I'll go away," he said. He didn't say goodbye. There wasn't any room in him to think of things like that. He walked away quickly and a bit unsteadily. He went around the corner of the fish house. We've never seen him since.

Croy kept watching the place where John Lash had disappeared. Betty kept whispering to him. But in about ten minutes Croy stopped struggling.

"There, baby. There," I heard Betty whisper.

He gave a big convulsive shudder and looked around, first at her and then at the rest of us, frowning a little as if he had forgotten something.

"Sorry," he said huskily. "Real sorry." And that is all he ever said about it. He promised that he was all right. I carried his stuff to their car. Betty bound his ankle with a strip of towel. He leaned heavily on her to the car.

6.

That's almost all, except the part I don't understand. The Deep Six is back up to about fifteen again. We have a compressor now, and new spots to go, and we did fine in the inter-club competitions this

year. We're easy with each other, and have some laughs.

But Croy never came back. He and Betty, they go out by themselves in a kicker boat when the weather is right. I don't see any reason why he didn't come back. He says hello when we see him around. Maybe he's ashamed we saw him like that, saw that wildness.

One morning not long ago I went out alone on the Gulf side. I got out there early and mist hung heavy on the water. I tilted my old outboard up and rowed silently. It was kind of eerie there in the mist in the early morning. All of a sudden I began to hear voices. It was hard to tell direction but they kept getting louder. There was a deep voice, a man's voice, talking and talking and talking, and every so often a woman would say one or two words, soft and soothing.

All of a sudden I recognized the voices as Croy's and Betty's. I couldn't catch any of the words. I rested on the oars. It made me feel strange. I figured I could get closer and find out what in the world Croy could talk about for so long.

But then understanding came to me suddenly, and it wasn't necessary to listen. I understood suddenly that there was only one subject on which a quiet guy like Croy could talk and talk and talk, and that the situation wasn't over and maybe would never be over. And I realized that embarrassment was only part of the reason Croy didn't come skin-diving with us any more; the rest of the reason was that the sight of us reminded him too strongly of John Lash. I turned the dinghy and headed off the other way until their voices faded and were gone.

Later in the morning after the sun had burned the mist off, I was spin casting with a dude and monofilament line over a weed bed when they went by, heading in, their big outboard roaring, the bow wave breaking the glassy look of the morning Gulf.

Croy was at the motor, Betty up in the bow.

Betty waved at me and Croy gave me a sort of little nod as they went by. I waved back. Their swell rocked me and then they were gone in the distance.

She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You could look at her all day and not find anything wrong.





You Can't Trust a Man

BY
HELEN
NIELSEN

It had been a long time, but now he was back. And he was going to get what he deserved for being so patient . . .

THEY were a couple of very special jobs, — the convertible and the woman. Blonde, streamlined, and plenty of fire power under the hood. The convertible was a later model, at least twenty-five years later, but it didn't have any more pick-up and not nearly as much maneuverability in traffic.

She came across the parking lot like a stripper prancing out on the runway, a healthy, old-fashioned girl who believed that whatsoever the Lord hath cleaved asunder no Parisian designer should join together. She was wearing the kind of gown that's called a creation and carries a three-figure price tag, and over it hung a pastel mink stole that could feed a family of six for a couple of

years. She opened the door of the convertible and slid in behind the wheel over red leather upholstery as soft as a lover's caress, and was just touching a gold-tipped cigarette to a jewelled lighter when the opposite door opened and a thin man in a shabby suit and a battered hat crawled in beside her.

For just an instant the flame in the woman's gloved hand brightened her face like candlelight before a Madonna, and then the flame and the illusion died together.

"Faithful Tony," she murmured. "I knew you would come."

A spiral of smoke sought the open window like a released soul; then the motor throbbed alive and twin eyes cored holes in the darkness. The woman barely glanced at the shabby man. She was too busy steering that land cruiser out onto a street that was a lot more crowded at other hours when the little shops and the big markets were open for business. Now, only one place was still open, and business was fine. You could see the colored neons and hear the wail of a clarinet being tortured by an orgy of jungle drums, and out in front of a chocolate stucco building without windows you could see the bigger-than-life photo of a full-mouthed blonde who didn't look at all Madonna-like under floodlights.

"Featuring Crystal Coe and her intimate songs," the shabby man read aloud, as they wheeled past the billboard. "You're big time now, baby. Real big time."

There was no enthusiasm in the words. He didn't sound like a press-agent, or an M.C., or a kid with an autograph book in his hand.

"Is that why you wanted to see me?" the woman asked.

"Did I want to see you?" A twisted smile slid across the man's dark face. "I thought it was the other way around. I thought it was Crystal Coe who phoned my hotel and set up this cozy reunion."

"*After* I read your threatening note."

"Threatening?" The smile was wider now. "You've been imagining things, baby. That was just a fan letter."

He wasn't going to be offered one of those gold-tipped smokes, so the man poked around in his pockets until he came up with a crumpled pack of his own. The lighter on the instrument panel worked fine. Any time it didn't this job would be traded in on a newer model.

"Just imagining things," he repeated. "You always did have a big imagination. Remember that story you told me back in Cleveland seven years ago? It was a real heart-breaker . . . 'I can't take the rap, Tony. I can't have our baby born in prison!' "

A deep drag on the cigarette and the man leaned back against the deep-cushioned seat. The way he did it, it was as if he hadn't been so comfortable in a long time. It was as if he'd like to take off his shoes and stay a while.

"I never did get a birth announcement," he added. "What was it, Crystal — a boy or a girl?"

"A girl can make a mistake," the woman said.

"That's right, baby. She sure can."

His voice was as cold as the night air. The woman pressed a button with her left hand and the window hummed upward. Everything automatic. Press a button and the red carpet rolls out . . . as long as nobody turns off the ignition.

"No birth announcement, no letters," the man mused. "Seven years is a long time to sit in stir without letters, but then I guess you were busy. Broadway . . . Hollywood . . . Hell, baby, I never knew you could sing. I always thought you had only one talent."

Up ahead, a light turned red and the convertible stopped with a lurch. Gloved fingers snuffed out a gold-tipped cigarette in a tray that was already overloaded and then tightened on the steering wheel. It was so late the streets were like eyeless sockets in the face of the city. A diesel trailer job thundered up in the next lane, and a black and white prowl car sniffed past the intersection, but that was the only traffic in the time it took for the light to turn green.

"All right, Tony," the woman said, as the convertible leaped forward, "what do you want?"

"Seven years . . ."

It might have been an answer, or it might have been just a man talking to himself. He wriggled down against the soft leather until the battered hat tipped down over his eyes.

"For me they were empty years, Crystal. For me no bright lights, no big time. At first I nearly went crazy wondering why you didn't write. I thought may be that stupid gin mill operator got wise that it was your fingers in his till instead of mine. Then I thought maybe something went wrong with the baby. That's a laugh, isn't it? I'll bet you've split your sides over it more than once."

The gloved fingers tightened even more on the steering wheel, but still the woman didn't turn her head. She was driving slowly and carefully. She never took her eyes from the street except to glance at the instrument panel now and then.

". . . Empty years," the man continued. "Then, all of a sudden, they weren't empty any more because one day I saw a newspaper and guess whose picture? I didn't recognize you right off, not with the blonde hair and the fancy clothes and that name — Crystal Coe. But the paper said you'd just changed your name by marrying that band leader. Whatever happened to him, baby? Was he the one who turned alcoholic, or was that the Hollywood agent?"

The light from the instrument panel caught the man's twisted smile, but Crystal Coe's face was like marble, cold, hard, and silent.

"No, I remember now," the man reflected, "the agent was the one who shot himself. I read all about it in a fan magazine. 'Crystal Coe's Tragic Loves' — that was the name of the story. But then it went on to say that you'd found happiness at last with an older man . . . old enough to own a few dozen oil fields."

"All right, so we've had the story of my life!" Crystal snapped.

"Not quite, baby. I was thinking ıbout that when I read that maga- zine story. They left out a few :hings. Maybe I should do a sequel: Crystal Coe's Secret Love.' How do ʼou like that for a title?"

"It'll never sell!"

"Why not? Because I can't swim n oil?"

"Because you can't prove any- hing!"

Marble shouldn't get hot so uickly; it was liable to crack. The ıan shook his head sadly.

"You know better than that, 'rystal," he said. "No matter how ıany little pieces of paper you ɜstroy, there's always a piece left mewhere."

Outside the wind was rising. It ›wled up from the desert a hun- ed miles away, whipping the dry ›nds of the skinny palms and flap- ng out the rhythm of the canvas p against the steel frame. Inside erything was cozy. Any time it .sn't, there was another button to ɜss.

The man stretched out his legs and leaned back his head so he could take it all in. All the chrome, all the leather, all the buttons . . .

"Nice," he murmured. "Real class. Not like the old days."

"You don't have to remind me," Crystal said.

"I'll bet I don't! Some things you would like to forget. That cheap apartment with the garbage smell in the halls — that lousy saloon where I found you talking the boys into buying another drink. You always were a good talker, Crystal, especially when you kept your mouth shut . . . That's something else the story in the magazine got wrong. It said you started out as a waitress."

He reached out and pressed one of the buttons. In a couple of seconds the radio began to give out with a jump tune from somebody's all-night platter show. An old jump tune. Seven years old, anyway.

"Remember that one?" he asked. "Remember how we used to feed nickels in the juke box so we could kick that one around? Takes a dime now. Seems like everything's a lot more expensive than it was seven years ago."

"How expensive, Tony?"

If the woman had been looking at him, she would have seen how his mouth twisted upward at the corners. But she didn't look at him, and he didn't answer her. The brasses took a chorus and then the piano came up strong. Whoever was playing it must have had ten fingers on each hand. Then the bass came in

like the amplified heartbeat of a bad case of hypertension.

"You can't beat the old tunes," Tony said. "The old tunes, the old days . . . the old loves. Sometimes, when I was sweating out those seven years for you, baby, I'd wake up in the night and forget where I was. I'd reach out for you in the darkness and grab an armful of air, and then lie awake all night going crazy with memories. We did have some good times in the old days. Even you must remember that."

"I stopped remembering," Crystal said, "a long time ago."

"Before you knew me?"

There was no answer but the whine of the tires as they took the turns. The street was developing curves now. The little shops and the markets had been replaced by neatly clipped lawns and a geraniums.

"It must have been before you knew me," Tony said. "You must have started forgetting early to be such an expert so young . . . But I couldn't forget. I'd keep remembering how I used to feel whenever I worked the late show and came home to find you out at that dive again. It's in the blood, I guess. Once a saloon tramp, always a saloon tramp. But it didn't matter. That's the crazy part of this whole thing, baby. Whatever you did, I made excuses. Even when you took that money I blamed myself because I was just a lousy movie projectionist and couldn't make enough to give you the things you wanted."

Suddenly the man threw back his head and laughed, high-pitched and humorless.

"Remember how I used to tinker around in the basement trying to invent something that would make us rich? Always something. Always some new idea I was going to turn into a fortune so I could dress you in mink . . ."

He reached out and stroked the soft fur where it rested close to her throat. There was no pressure in his feeling fingers, but she trembled slightly at the touch.

". . . Always something," he murmured. "I used to think about that whenever I read about one of your divorce settlements. I guess no invention is ever going to improve on nature."

"A girl has to live!" Crystal snapped. "She can't wait around for some tinkering fool forever! She has to live!"

"Are you sure of that, baby? Are you real sure?" The laugh came again, thin as the distance between his fingers and her throat. "I could have saved those suckers a lot of money if I'd sounded off, couldn't I? Me, the jailbird Crystal Coe couldn't acknowledge even to a judge. . . . But that would have spoiled everything."

"For both of us, Tony."

"For both of us," he echoed. The fingers touched her skin now, slowly, carefully, they barely touched her skin. "Now you're getting the idea, Crystal. That's what I've had in

mind all these years. So Tony kept his mouth shut and just went on remembering and tinkering. They have places for that even in stir. Always something. Always figuring something . . ."

"How much, Tony?" she asked.

"You're not the only one who likes expensive things, baby. Seven years of hunger can sure give a man an appetite for expensive things."

"I asked you: how much?"

"For what I want, you won't need your checkbook."

"Then what?"

The crooked smile sliced across the man's face again, and the fingers were real busy now.

"I just told you," he said. "Seven years is a long time to live on memories . . . What do you think I want, Crystal? After all, I'm still your husband."

When the record stopped playing on that platter show the announcer started selling used cars and Crystal's hand plunged him into silence. For a few blocks it was terribly quiet. All that horsepower under the hood barely whispered at the darkness, and the street elbowed in close to the hills where even the wind was subdued. The lawns were wide and deep now, and the night had that lush hush of a neighborhood where nobody worries in public.

. . . Silence, and then a woman's voice speaking as unemotionally as if the man in the shabby suit had suggested stopping someplace for a nightcap or a cup of coffee.

"I'll have to stop for gas," she said, glancing at the instrument panel again. "The tank's nearly empty."

"And then what?" the man asked.

"There won't be anyone at the beach house tonight. We never use it in winter."

Just like that. No argument at all. The smile lingered on the man's face. The specialty of the house wasn't so expensive after all if you had a membership. Just ahead the white glow of a twenty-four hour service station came into view like an actor responding to cue, and the little green arrow on the instrument panel clicked the left hand warning for all the traffic that wasn't in sight. As the convertible slid alongside the gas pumps the man began to laugh again. He was laughing like a fool by the time the station jockey poked his head in the window.

"Fill it up," Crystal said, and whirled about to meet the laughter. There wasn't a trace of that marble face make-up now. She was wearing a colorful blend of bewilderment and anger.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

Tony's hand was on the door handle. "That's my business," he said. "This is where we part company."

"I don't understand —"

"I'll bet you don't! Nobody ever walked out on you, did they, baby? Nobody ever turned down such an invitation! That's what I figured

while I was giving you the big buildup about the hungry years. I wanted you to learn how it feels to have the only thing you can offer thrown back in your face . . . Don't you get it, baby? I'm the chump who sweated out seven years in a cell because I loved you. You were in my blood, even when I knew about all those other guys. I used to rip your pictures apart, pretending they were you! A thousand times I've smashed your face until it wouldn't look good to any man; a hundred times I've killed you in a hundred ways! All these years I've dreamed of what I'd do when I got out and found you again . . .

". . . Last night I did find you. I went to that club where you sing, if that's what they call it now, and I saw the woman I'd gone through so much hell for, — just a cheap, overdressed saloon tramp, that's all. Seven years is enough to give any saloon tramp. I went back to my hotel and wrote you that note just so you'd know I was out again, so you could do the sweating for a change; but I never intended to see you again. I've had it, baby. I'm cured. I don't need your dirty money, and I don't want you in that beach house or anywhere else. I wouldn't touch you if this was the coldest night of the year!"

It wasn't cold at all. In the last few moments the temperature had gone high in the front seat of that fancy convertible, and there was no button to press that would cool it off. Anger, surprise, and something else livened Crystal's face: something like excitement. Her package had been delivered C.O.D., but she wasn't ready to let the delivery man go.

"Wait! Not here!" she commanded. "Don't get out yet!"

Tony drew back from the door. "I get it," he said. "The station man — you're known here."

"Yes, I am."

"And you wouldn't want a shabby bum to be seen getting out of your car under all these lights any more than you wanted him calling at your dressing room. A parking lot is darker."

She didn't answer. All this time the automatic pump had been whining out gallonage; now it stopped and she leaned across to open the glove compartment. She could have reached without rubbing so close to him, but this was her routine and she played it her way. He got the treatment again as she drew back with the coupon book.

"Nice try," Tony murmured, "but I'm not aroused —"

Not by the routine, maybe, but by something else. He never finished his speech because suddenly he was too interested in what he saw inside that lighted glove compartment. It was a gun, — a small, snub-nosed revolver . . .

"That'll be four-ninety, lady," the station jockey said at the window.

Crystal scratched her pen across

the coupon and handed it to the man. "Here, you finish filling it out," she said. "I can never remember the license number."

. . . A small, snub-nosed revolver. When she looked around it was resting in Tony's hand.

"Go ahead, take it," she said. "It's yours."

"You've kept it all these years," he murmured.

"They're difficult things to get rid of."

"You bet they are — especially if you happen to be an ex-con! No thanks, baby, I don't want this gift either."

He started to put the gun back in the glove compartment, but Crystal intercepted the attempt. She seemed to feel better when it was tucked just inside the open handbag in her lap. She sighed as if something had been too tight and now it was loosened.

"Here's your book, lady," the station man said at the window again.

"Did you get the number?" she asked.

"I sure did, lady."

She was relaxed now. Not cold, not marble at all. "I wonder if Sunset's open all the way out?" she asked. "They were working on it last week."

"Working on it?" echoed the station jockey. The bright overhead light made his face look as white as his uniform. "Oh, sure. It's okay now, lady."

"Fine. Then I'll just stay on Sunset."

She was smiling, actually smiling. The convertible cleared its throat and swung back onto the boulevard. Within a few seconds the bright white glow of the all night station had been swallowed up in a blackness punctuated only by an occasional street lamp marking the curving sweep of a road that climbed and dipped on its way to find the sea.

"It's always nice to know where to find a station open at this hour," Crystal murmured. "I usually have the chauffeur get the tank filled every morning, but this morning I didn't. It's easy to get careless, isn't it, Tony?"

There was such a thing as being too relaxed. Some people shouldn't be friendly.

"You must have been really scared," Tony said, eyeing her face in the glow of the instrument lights. "How come you set up this intimate little rendezvous if you thought I wanted to kill you? Did you think I'd be sucker enough to try something at that station?"

"As you say, Tony, there's always a piece left somewhere."

"A piece?"

"A record, a proof of our marriage. Fortunately, you're the only person on this earth who would ever think to look for it."

"Fortunately — ?" Tony didn't laugh any more; he didn't even smile. "Look, I told you," he said, "I want no part of you, and I

wouldn't dream of ruining your 'career.' The chump who marries Crystal Coe deserves all the grief he gets, even if it isn't legal . . . You can let me off at the next bus stop."

"You'll never get a bus at this hour."

"Then I'll walk!"

"You don't have to walk, Tony. I'll take you where you're going."

She meant what she was saying, whatever it was. The accelerator moved closer to the floorboards and the convertible took the hills as if they were gulleys.

"What's the pitch?" Tony demanded. "Is your pride wounded? Do you still think you can stir up the embers at that beach house?"

"Maybe that's it, Tony."

"And maybe it isn't? . . . What the hell's that?"

One minute there was nothing on the face of the earth but that big white convertible gouging a tunnel through the blackness, and then they had company. A pair of bright headlights were bouncing in the rear view mirror, and a red spot was flashing a signal that meant trouble in anybody's neighborhood . . . especially to an ex-con who suddenly felt a little conspicuous among all the gilt.

"The police!" he gasped. "Damn you, what is this? What are you trying to do?"

It was such a jolly ride. The man had his laugh at the service station, and the woman had hers as she bore down on that foot pedal. "I'm trying to shake them, Tony," she said, "trying to out-distance them, like the man told me."

"Man?" he yelled. "What man?"

She laughed again. "Why, the man who's holding the gun on me, of course! The man who crawled into my car back at that parking lot and was too busy enjoying his big joke to worry about why I wanted his fingerprints on his own gun . . . or to notice what I wrote on a gas coupon. Do you want to know what I wrote, Tony? I wrote — 'this man is going to kill me . . . call the police!' . . . Don't you get it, Tony? Don't you understand?"

Understanding always took a little time, a few seconds, maybe, a fraction of a second. Time enough for the convertible to make a sudden turn off the boulevard, barely miss a row of brooding pepper trees, and go roaring down a dark side street that stretched like an empty corridor to nowhere. Time enough for a passenger, without a steering wheel to use as a brace, to pick himself off the instrument panel and make a lunge for that gun in the open handbag . . . and come in second.

"Too late," Crystal said, without laughter. "You should have killed me back at the station when you had the chance . . . but I knew you wouldn't. You never had that kind of nerve, and it takes nerve, Tony, to get what you want . . . and keep it!"

"You're crazy!" he yelled. "I told you I was clearing out!"

"If I believed that I would be crazy! Nobody walks away from a sure thing! If I let you live, you'd bleed me white —"

"But I don't *need* your money — ! You don't understand —"

Shout at the stars . . . shout at the wind trying to pull loose from the nodding pepper trees . . . shout at death, it was all the same now. Those headlights were in the rear view mirror again and the lights of the convertible had picked up a row of red buttons on the dead-end barrier ahead. It was time to hit the power brakes and brace against that steering wheel once more, because every ride had to end sometime . . .

The man plunged forward. He was clawing at the door as he came up, but it was much too late. The snub nosed revolver had been in the woman's hand ever since the turn-off, and she wasn't going to let him go without a farewell present.

"The first lesson I ever learned was that you can't trust a man," she said. Then she pulled the trigger. Once . . . twice . . .

A frantic hand grabbed at her, ripping away the front of that three-figured creation . . . Three times . . .

He was dead when the police reached the convertible, dead and bleeding all over the soft red upholstery.

The woman was sobbing hysterically over the steering wheel.

Crystal Coe sobbed for a long time. Nobody asks questions of a sobbing woman; they just stand around looking miserable and wait for her to tell her own story in her own way . . . and in her own time. The time was almost dawn. The window behind the police lieutenant's head had begun to show a foggy gray, and the white ceiling light was starting to pale from competition. In the anteroom outside the lieutenant's office, the representatives of the press were waiting for another front page spread that would crowd the minor problem of world survival back to the obituaries where it belonged, and inside the office Crystal Coe was waiting for an annoyance to end. She sat small and helpless in her chair, her face drawn and her eyes appropriately red. At her side stood a paunchy old man with a sweaty bald head and an accumulation of chins. In one hand he held a white Stetson hat; with the other he caressed her bare shoulder. Crystal restrained a shudder and smiled bravely.

"I guess the good Lord was riding with me," she said, in a husky voice. "I knew from the moment the man climbed into my car that he meant to kill me . . . or worse." She paused to draw the mink scarf tighter across her de-bosomed gown. The lieutenant dropped his eyes, and the hand on her shoulder tightened. "All I could do was drive slowly and try to keep him talking —"

"You're a brave woman, Miss Coe," the lieutenant said. "Most women wouldn't have had the presence of mind."

"But there was no choice, officer. I had to take a chance on a prowl car being near that station . . . I had to swing off on that dead end street so he wouldn't make me lose it when it came. That's when he fell against the instrument panel and dropped the gun. That's when I — Oh, it was so terrible!"

Crystal Coe buried her face in a handful of damp linen and smothered one last sob. "My wife's been through enough for one night," the paunchy man said. "I'm takin' her home right now!" It was the voice of a man who didn't expect an argument when he spoke, and he didn't get one now. There was a gun on the lieutenant's desk that was covered with a dead man's fingerprints, — there was a coupon from a gasoline credit book covered with a frightened woman's message. There was no argument at all.

Behind the damp linen, Crystal Coe smiled. She was safe now. Nobody would have any curiosity about a crazed ex-convict. She could pose for the photographers outside and wait for the afternoon editions to finish up the story . . . "Crystal Coe Slays Attacker" . . . "Singer Escapes Rapist." She could go into seclusion for a week or two to rest her nerves, and then go shopping for a new convertible. The old one had bullet holes in the upholstery.

"The man must have been crazy," the lieutenant muttered, "just plain crazy. That station attendant said he was laughing like a maniac."

He couldn't know, of course, what brought the flash of anger to Crystal Coe's eyes. Not knowing, he mistook it for something else.

"Now, don't you trouble yourself because you had to kill a man like that," he said quickly. "He'd have done the same to you — and worse. But his death is going to cause a big headache for somebody. I'm just glad it isn't in my department."

Crystal came to her feet slowly. She didn't want to ask. She didn't want to do anything but get out of this awful place fast, but she had to know.

"A headache — ?" she echoed.

"A big headache," the lieutenant said. "You see, Miss Coe, we had a report on this man a few days ago. He was an ex-convict, a parolee from another state, but he had special permission to leave that state and come out here to close a business deal. Seems he'd invented something while he was in prison — some kind of equipment for showing motion pictures. Signed a contract yesterday that's supposed to guarantee a quarter of a million dollars, cash, for his patent."

"A quarter of a million!"

"Just plain crazy," he repeated, "but can you imagine the kind of investigation it's going to entail to dig up this man's past and find his beneficiary?"

He took the gun and used it, because the little man with yellow pointed shoes told him to.

May I Come In?

BY FLETCHER FLORA



I saw Marilla today, and it all came back with the sight of him, all the details I've tried to remember and couldn't — all the little, important details that meant so much, all about the night and what happened in the night and all things before and afterward. . . .

THE NIGHT was hot and humid. I lay in my room on a sheet sodden with the seepage from my pores, and suspended above me in the dark like a design in ectoplasm was the face of the man named Marilla, and the hate within me stirred and flowed and seeped with the sweat

from my pores, and the color of my hate was yellow.

I got off the bed and walked on bare feet across the warm floor to the window, but there was no air moving at the window or outside the window, and the adherent heat had saturated my flesh and soaked through my eyes into the cavity of my skull to lie like a thick, smothering fog over the contours of my brain. I could hear, across the narrow interval that separated houses, the whirr of blades beating the air, and because my eyes were like cat's eyes, I could see behind the blades into the black, gasping room, and it was the bedroom of Mrs. Willkins, and she was lying nude on her bed under the contrived breeze, and her body was gross and ugly with flesh loose on its bones, and I hated her, just as I hated the ectoplasmic face of the man named Marilla, with all the force of my yellow hate.

Turning away from the window, I found in the darkness a pint of gin on a chest and poured two fingers into a tumbler. I sat on the edge of the bed and drank the gin and then lay down again, and the face of Marilla was still suspended above me, and in a moment the face of Freda was there too, and I began to think deliberately about Marilla and Freda, and the reason I hated Marilla.

I stood with Freda in front of the shining glass window, and she pointed out the coat to me on the arrogant blonde dummy. I could see Freda's reflected face in the glass from my angle of vision, and her lips were slightly open in excitement and desire, and I felt happy and a little sad at the same time to see her that way, because it wasn't, after all, much of a coat, not mink or ermine or any kind of fur at all, but just a plain cloth coat that was a kind of pink color and looked like it would be as soft as down to the touch.

"It's beautiful," Freda said. "It's, oh, so beautiful," and I said, "You like it? You like to have it?" and she said, "Oh, yes," in a kind of expiring, incredulous whisper that was like the expression of a child who just can't believe the wonderful thing that's about to happen.

We went into the store and up to the floor where the coats were sold, and Freda tried on the coat, turning around and around in front of the mirror and stroking the cloth as if it were a kitten and making a soft little purring sound as if she were the kitten she was stroking. I teased her a little, saying that, well, it was rather expensive and would raise hell with the budget, but I knew all the time that I was going to buy it for her, because she wanted it so much and because it made her look even more beautiful than before, and after a while I went up to the credit department and made arrangements for monthly payments, because I didn't have the price. When I came back down, she was still standing in front of the mirror in the coat, and I said, "You going to wear it?" and she said, "Oh, yes,

I'm going to wear it and sleep in it and never take it off," and I kept remembering afterward that it wasn't after all, so much of a coat, not fur or anything, but just pink cloth.

We went down in the elevator, and she clung to my arm and kissed me over and over with her eyes, and I thought it was the best buy I'd ever made and cheap at the price, even if I had had to arrange monthly payments. We went out onto the street through the revolving door, walking close together in the same section of the door because Freda wouldn't let loose of my arm, and the street was bright and soft and cool with the cool, bright softness of April, and it was just the kind of day and street for a new pink coat. We walked down the street toward the drug store on the corner, and I was thinking that I'd take Freda into the store for some of the peppermint ice cream with chunks of stick peppermint in it that she liked so much, and it occurred to me that the ice cream was just about the color of the pink coat, and then there were a couple of explosions inside the drug store, and after a second or two a woman began to scream in a high, ragged voice that went on and on, and the door of the store flew open, and a man ran out with a gun in his hand, and the man was Marilla, the man they were later to call a psychopathic killer.

He ran toward us along the sidewalk waving the gun, and he ran with a queer, lurching gait, as if he were crippled, or one leg were shorter than the other, and as he ran he made a sound that was something like a whimper and something like a cry. Between us and him was a kid carrying a shoe shine box, and the kid stopped and stood stiffly with the box hanging at his side, and then the gun in Marilla's hand began to explode again, and the kid set the box down on the sidewalk and fell over sideways across it. I stood looking at the kid, and I realized suddenly that Freda had let go of my arm, and I turned to see if she was still there, but she wasn't, and I couldn't see her anywhere. Marilla ran past me, and I could see directly into his big eyes that were like black puddles of liquid terror, and he pointed the gun at my face and pulled the trigger, and I could hear the dull click of the hammer on a dead shell. I could have tackled him and brought him down, but I didn't, because just then I saw that Freda was lying on the sidewalk like the kid up ahead, but in a different position, on her back with the new coat spread open around her like something that had been put there in advance for her to lie on. I knelt down beside her on the sidewalk and lifted her head and began to say her name, and at first I thought she'd fainted, but then I saw the small black hole that was about three inches in a straight line below the hollow of her throat, and I knew that she was dead.

They caught Marilla in a blind

alley. He was sitting in a corner with his knees drawn up and his head resting on his knees, and he was whimpering and crying, and his voice would rise now and then to a thin scream of terror, and the men who found him first almost beat him to death before the police came and took him away. Right after that, the next day or so, they began to say he was crazy, that he was just a crazy kid only twenty years old, and the psychiatrists had big words for the kind of craziness it was supposed to be, but I knew that nothing they could say would do him any good at all, because he had killed a man and a woman in the drug store and the shoe shine kid on the street, and above all he had killed Freda in her new pink coat.

They asked him why he had killed all those people, and they didn't even make any distinction between Freda and the others, and he said he hadn't hated any of them or anything like that, hadn't even wanted to kill them at all, but had killed them anyhow because he'd been told time and again to do it and finally had to do as he was told. They asked him who had told him to kill the people, just any people, and he said it was a thin little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin who wore yellow pointed shoes. The man had appeared in all sorts of odd places and told him to go out and kill some people.

It was part of the big lie, of course, that ridiculous part about the man coming and telling him to kill some people, it was part of the plan to keep him from paying for killing Freda, and anyone could see right through it, it was so transparent. You can buy some psychiatrist to verify something like that any time you've got the price, and I knew they'd hang him in spite of what any psychiatrist said, because God wanted him to hang just as much as I did, God and I hated him equally for what he'd done to Freda right when she was so happy.

I waited for them to try him, and finally they did, and I went and sat in the court room every day to watch him and to feel the yellow hate like pus inside me. He sat at the long table with the lawyers who defended him, and he always sat with his head bowed and his hands folded on top of the table in a posture of prayer, but once in a while he would look up briefly into the crowd, and the light of terror and inner cowering were there in his great liquid eyes, and I felt a fierce exaltation that he was suffering, and that the suffering he now felt was only the beginning of the suffering he would feel before he was through. He looked very small in the chair by the big table, hardly larger than a child, with narrow shoulders slumped forward and a slender neck supporting a head that was too big for his body, and the head looking even bigger than it really was because of the thick black shining curls that covered it. I kept watching him sit

there like he was praying, and I kept thinking that he could pray all he wanted to, but God wouldn't hear him, and that he could plead and lie and try all the tricks he could think of, but no one would believe him or pity him or do anything to help him, no one at all.

They put him on the stand at last to tell about the man who had come to tell him to kill, and he described the man again, just as he had to the psychiatrists, his pointed nose and pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes, and he spoke in a very soft voice that could barely be heard but contained all the time, somehow, the threat of rising abruptly to a shrill scream. It was all put on, part of the plan, but he was very clever, a great actor, and he told how the man had appeared the first time while he was standing on a bridge looking down at the water, and had sat down beside him another time in a movie theater, and had met him another time while he was walking along a path in the town park, and had then begun coming to his room late at night to knock softly on the door. No one was supposed to believe that the little man had actually come to him in those ways, or in any way at all, but everyone was supposed to believe that it had happened in his mind, that the little man was an hallucination of insanity, but I knew it hadn't happened that way either, that the man hadn't even appeared in Marilla's mind, and that it was all a story made up to get him out of it. I knew they'd hang him, and I tried to feel within myself the way he'd feel while he was waiting, and walking out to the scaffold, and standing there in the last instant with the black hood over his head and the rope around his neck.

But in the end they didn't hang him at all.

They let him out of it.

They said he wasn't guilty because he wasn't in his right mind and wasn't responsible for his acts, and they sent him off somewhere to a place with cool white rooms and a cool green lawn and doctors to look after him and nurses to wait on him.

I thought a lot about the twelve people on the jury who let him out of it, and I began to hate them the same as Marilla, and I wished they were all dead, dead as Freda, but the more I thought about them the more they seemed like all other people, and after a long time I realized it was because they really were like all other people on earth. Freda was dead, and no one cared, all the people on earth had said it was all right because of a ridiculous story about a little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes who had told a man named Marilla to kill her. Always I saw the face of Marilla and the face of Freda, and they seemed to get mixed up with other faces that I'd never seen before, and I wondered if I was insane myself, but

I wasn't, of course, any more than Marilla was.

And now I lay in my room in the hot and humid night, and across the interval between houses, behind the futile beating of blades, Mrs. Willkins' gross body stirred in her black and gasping room.

And there was something else. Something new.

A man was walking the dark and airless streets of town beneath layers of lifeless leaves.

He walked with mincing steps, and he was far away in the beginning, when I first saw him, and I lay on my bed in my room and followed his progress with cat's eyes through light and shadow across the pattern of the town. At times he was swallowed completely by darkness, and then no eyes could see him but mine, but the people who stirred in wakefulness in the houses he passed could hear the echo of his mincing steps, and he moved with surety of purpose and a pace that never varied through the silent, dappled streets until he came at last to the corner above my house and down the street to the house itself. Without moving from my bed, I could see him standing on the sidewalk below with his face lifted into the milky light of the moon, and then he came up across the porch into the house and up the stairs into the hall and stood outside my door.

I waited in the hot stillness, and after a while he knocked softly, and I got up in the dark, and my hand, swinging out, struck the tumbler on the table by the bed and knocked it to the floor with a sound of brittle thunder that rocked the room. I waited until the reverberations had diminished and died and the soft knock was repeated, and then I crossed to the door and opened it.

The warm fog inside my skull pressed closely on my brain, and though my head didn't ache exactly, it felt very light and queer. The man in the hall looked at me and bowed in a peculiar, old-fashioned way from the waist and smiled politely.

"Excuse me for disturbing you at this hour," he said, "but I must talk with you about a number of people. About Mrs. Willkins first of all, I think. May I come in?"

He was a little man with a long pointed nose and a pointed chin. He wore yellow pointed shoes.

I saw Marilla from my window. He was walking in the yard below with the same man in white who comes now and then to my room, and he sat for a while on a bench under a tree, and I could see him quite clearly. The queer thing is, there was no hate, no longer any hate, and I'm thinking that perhaps I will be allowed to walk in the yard soon, and that Marilla and I may meet and sit together under the tree and talk about these things that happened. It will be pleasant to talk with someone who knows and understands. . . .

The Blood Oath

A Manville Moon Story

BY RICHARD DEMING



Manville Moon had never seen Fausta frightened before. But Fausta had never run into the Mafia before, either . . .

I HAVE, on a variety of occasions, seen Fausta Moreni exhibit strong emotions. I have seen her joyful, angry, loving and jealous. But never before that day had I seen her afraid.

It was more than mere fear. Her face registered almost stark terror when I opened her office door unexpectedly and she looked up to see who was entering. When she saw my face, relief flooded her own, which

was an indication of her state of mind. Normally, while I do not exactly repulse people, the sight of my face does not inspire abandoned joy. In my youth a set of brass knuckles gave it a bent nose and one drooping eyelid, and even people as fond of me as Fausta are inclined to flinch when I come upon them unexpectedly.

Before I could even get the door closed Fausta was around the desk and clinging to me like a child seeking protection from a bully. Because of her Latin impulsiveness, it was not unusual for her to throw herself into my arms on sight, but usually, after planting one quick kiss on my chin, she would back off, examine me from narrowed eyes and lightly slap my face, as though I had been the aggressor. This time she merely clung.

Taking her by the shoulders, I pushed her away far enough to look down into her face. It was a lovely face. Though you usually expect Italian women to be dark, Fausta has vivid blonde hair in striking contrast to her brown eyes and coffee-with-cream complexion. Add perfect features, a form which would give goose bumps to an octogenarian, and you will begin to understand I had quite a woman by the shoulders.

I said, "What gives, baby?"

"Manny," she said. "Oh, Manny!" And she struggled to get back into my arms.

"Whoa!" I said, still holding her at arm's length. "What's all the excitement?"

She stopped struggling and just looked at me discouragedly. Then, with her shoulders sagging, she moved back to her desk. Opening a drawer, she removed a small sheet of paper and handed it to me.

The paper contained nothing but an India ink drawing of a black hand.

Examining the sheet on both sides without growing any wiser, I finally handed it back.

"Nice likeness, if you care for pictures of hands," I said. "Is it supposed to mean something?'

Fausta collapsed in the chair behind her desk. "Just the Mafia," she said tonelessly. "It is their way of announcing a death sentence."

"The Mafia! That comic opera outfit?"

And I began to develop a slow burn. I knew something, though not a great deal, about the Mafia. I knew Sicilian bandits had originated it in the nineteenth century at an extortion racket, but when immigrants brought it to the United States it gradually underwent a change. Though its criminal members still often used it for extortion, it had spread to include thousands who were not criminals at all. Probably most of its members were law-abiding people, at least those who lived in America, but also most top racketeers of Italian descent belonged to the secret organization.

I also knew it operated under a

ridiculous grammar-school sort of ritual which included blood oaths, passwords and idiotic warnings such as Fausta's black hand.

I said, "Maybe you'd better tell me the whole story."

It developed there was not much of a story to tell. The previous week two men had come into *El Patio*, Fausta's supper club, asked the head waiter to see her and been ushered back to her office. Neither gave a name, and she could describe them only as both dark, probably Italian, both of average build and both as well-dressed. She guessed them to be respectively about twenty-five and thirty years old.

The older man did all the talking, Fausta said, and even he did very little. He simply announced that the Mafia from that day forward expected ten percent of *El Patio's* net profit, and said he or his companion would stop by once a week to pick it up.

As the most popular supper club in town, *El Patio's* net profit runs into nearly a quarter million a year. Hoping that the Mafia would settle for less than its original demand, Fausta placed only a hundred dollars in the envelope the younger man called for that morning. The result had been the black hand missive, which had come to her in a sealed envelope handed by some unidentified customer to one of her waiters.

"Why did you pay anything at all?" I asked. "Why didn't you phone the police?"

"Report the Mafia, Manny? Then surely they would kill me."

"They're only men," I said. "Not supernatural creatures. They fit into jail cells as easily as other men."

"You do not understand," she said hopelessly. "*No one* can fight the Mafia. Do you not know that even the great Enrico Caruso all his life paid ten percent of his earnings to the Mafia?"

"I've read that," I admitted. "But just because he was a sucker, you don't have to be."

At that moment the desk phone rang. Answering it, Fausta drew a deep breath and then just listened.

After a moment she said, "All right. Anything you say. This evening at seven." And slowly hung up.

"The Mafia again?" I asked.

Numbly she nodded. "I have another chance. My fee is five hundred dollars a week. They say they estimate the club's profit at five thousand, but it is not that high. They want to pick up the other four hundred for the first week at seven tonight."

Looking at my watch, I saw it was nearly one. "That gives me six hours," I said. "Get the envelope ready, and if you don't hear from me, pay off when they come. I may be back and I may not."

Coming around the desk, she laid frightened hand on my arm. "What are you going to do, Manny?"

"Just poke around," I said.

"You will be killed, Manny. Please do not try to fight the Mafia."

I said, "I won't be killed, so stop jittering. Just do as I said."

She made another attempt to stop me by throwing her arms around my neck, but I simply pushed her away and walked out. I even forgot to tell her the reason I had dropped by was to ask her to go night-clubbing that night.

Normally if anyone told me about being blackmailed by the Mafia, I would advise calling the police and let my responsibility end there whether the advice was taken or not, for as a private cop I have no responsibility to hunt down criminals unless a client engages me to do so. But Fausta Moreni is not just anyone. She is the girl I once wanted to marry, and though that is now a thing of the past for reasons which make another story, she is still pretty special to me. I had not let Fausta see it, but the fear in her face put me into a boiling rage. I had plans for her extortioners which would either get me dead, or convince them Fausta was a good person to steer clear of.

My first stop was at the office of my old friend, Inspector Warren Day of Homicide. As usual he raised his skinny bald head to peer at me over his glasses when I entered, and inquired when I was going to learn to knock before opening doors.

"When you start squandering your money on loose women," I told the tight-fisted old woman-hater. "What do you know about the Mafia, Inspector?"

He looked at me silently as I found a seat and reached for his cigar humidor. Automatically he moved it out of the way before I could raise the lid, forcing me to light one of my own cigars.

"What about the Mafia, Moon?"

"That was my question. What about it?"

He examined me curiously, finally said, "It's supposed to run the national crime syndicate. Or maybe vice versa. Aside from that I don't know anything about it."

"I don't mean nationally," I said. "I mean the local Mafia."

"There isn't any," he said flatly.

"You're certain?"

For a long time he just looked at me. Then he said, "Maybe there is some local stuff, but it's not the same bunch that's tied up with the syndicate. Maybe in a loose sort of way it's part of the same organization, but it doesn't function as a racket. You know how old-country people are. They stick together. They like their own people to settle disputes according to their own traditions instead of going into strange courts. A lot of Italians who never did anything criminal in their lives belong to the Mafia. The leaders act as sort of extra-legal judges to settle marital disputes and so on. I wouldn't be surprised to find the Mafia here, but I'll bet its members are all grocers and barbers and working men, not hoods."

"I see," I said, rising. "Thanks a lot, Inspector."

"Wait a minute, Moon. What's this all about?"

"Nothing. I seem to have been following a wrong lead. See you around, Inspector."

Having verified what I already suspected, that the police had no knowledge of the Mafia running its extortion racket in town, I realized I was going to have to stick my neck out a little to gain information. My next move was to visit Rome Alley.

Rome Alley is the colloquial name for a five-block stretch of Columbus Street occupied almost entirely by restaurants, fruit stands and other small businesses run by Italians.

My plan of strategy was based on the knowledge that the Mafia's extortion racket is aimed solely at Italians. Though I have made no detailed study of the secret organization, I assume the reason for this is that the Mafia knows the chance of an Italian running to the police is much slimmer than if the Mafia indiscriminately picked on all nationalities. Practically from birth people of Italian descent, even third- and fourth-generation citizens, know what the Mafia is and have an inbred fear of it. They know its ruthlessness and they know what happens to Italians who refuse to pay the traditional ten percent tribute. I was therefore fairly certain that if the organization was operating on any large scale, practiclly every small business along Rome Alley would be paying tribute.

I started at a small fruit store. It was empty when I entered, but the jangle of a bell attached to the screen door brought a luscious, olive-skinned woman in her late twenties from what seemed to be an apartment at the rear. She was a typical Italian beauty, plump and ripe and clean-smelling as fresh sheets. She wore a simple print house dress.

"The boss around?" I asked her.

White teeth flashed in a smile. "I am the boss, mister. Mrs. Nina Cellini."

The "Mrs." made me glance at her left hand, which bore a plain gold band. It is uncommon among Italian families for anyone but the man of the house to be boss, and I must have looked surprised, for she grinned at my expression.

"I am a widow five years," she explained. "You selling something, mister?"

"No," I said. I moved my head toward the rear apartment. "Anyone else back there?"

She looked at me suspiciously, but after examining me again, apparently decided I wasn't a stickup artist. Suddenly a light of understanding dawned in her eyes. Moving from behind the counter, she came close and looked up at me with frank interest.

"You are in answer to the ad," she stated.

"Ad?" I asked.

Tilting her head first to one side and then the other, she studied me from head to foot.

"You are in good health?" she asked. "No physical defects?"

"I have a false right leg below the knee," I admitted. "Otherwise I'm pretty sound."

Her lips pursed and she lowered her gaze to stare dubiously at the indicated limb. Since she seemed interested, I walked across the store and back again, just to show her I had no limp.

"It does not show and does not seem to inconvenience you," she decided. "You have two thousand dollars in the bank?"

Still at sea, I said, "About eighteen hundred, I think."

Her shoulders raised in a shrug. "For two hundred dollars I would not quibble. But the important thing is love."

She raised her eyebrows questioningly and I said, "Well, if you'd like a demonstration . . ."

Suddenly coy, she cast down her eyes and blushed a furious red. Then she slanted her gaze upward again and said in a conspiritorial voice, "Maybe one kiss. Just to see, I mean."

"Sure," I said agreeably, and immediately she moved into my arms.

I suspect we would still be glued together if I hadn't decided I needed air after about two minutes, for she gave no indication of ever wanting to end the kiss. I broke away by main force, retreated a step and wiped the lipstick from my mouth with a handkerchief.

"Did I pass?" I asked.

"I think, but it was really very short to tell."

She moved toward me tentatively and I retreated another step. Accepting defeat, she clasped her hands in front of her and again eyed me critically.

"I have three children," she said. "You like children, do you not?"

I decided that interesting as the conversation was, it was time to clarify things.

"Just who do you think I am?" I asked.

She looked surprised. "You are in answer to the ad, are you not? My matrimonial ad."

Regretfully I shook my head. "I'm just here for the weekly tribute. The ten percent."

"Tribute? Ten percent?" She looked puzzled. "You are not in answer to the ad?"

"The Mafia tribute."

Her face had begun to develop an angry look, but the word "Mafia" changed her expression to startlement. "Mafia? I know nothing of the Mafia."

That was all I wanted to know. Tipping my hat, I walked out while she looked after me with an expression on her face which indicated she thought I was crazy.

Mrs. Nina Cellini's reaction was typical to what I encountered all along Rome Alley. Her reaction to the Mafia, I mean, for I didn't run into any more people who mistook my identity. I hit fifteen places of business, in each announced I had

come for the tribute, and in every one get nothing but uncomprehending looks. When I dropped the word "Mafia," the reaction was either startlement or guarded truculence, but nowhere did it seem to inspire fear.

It seemed that no one at all along Rome Alley was afraid of the Mafia.

Near the end of Rome Alley I came to a drug store and decided I might as well use it for my next move. When I asked the druggist if I could use his phone, he waved me to a lone booth at the back.

Turning to the yellow section of the phone book, I went down the restaurant list and picked out several first-class restaurants located outside of the Italian section, but which were run by people of Italian descent. In order I began to call them.

I hit the jackpot on the first try. Mr. Anthony Marizelli, proprietor of *Marizelli's Restaurant* over on the West Side, grew panic-stricken when I inquired about the tribute.

"It was paid!" he said. "The man picked it up yesterday. You cannot blame me if it was not turned in by your man. I swear on my mother's name it was paid!"

"Relax," I said. "I guess there's just been a mistake. See you next week." And I hung up.

Two more phone calls, with similar panic-stricken reactions from both restaurateurs, gave me the picture. The extortionists were carefully avoiding Rome Alley and hitting only Italians who owned big establishments and could pay off in a large way.

The first thing I noticed when I came out of the phone booth was the odd expression on the face of the druggist. He seemed so pointedly preoccupied with inspecting a shelf of toiletry supplies, I got the impression he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

Sensing the strain in him, I swept my eye around the store. Two men had come in while I was in the phone booth. One sat at the soda counter puffing on a cigarette, but with no drink before him. The other idly glanced over the magazine rack. Neither paid any attention either to me or to each other.

Both were dark, muscular men of middle age and looked like they might be day laborers. After examining their cheap but serviceable suits and heavy work shoes, I decided they were just that, and I was letting the Mafia's reputation touch my imagination.

Neither so much as glanced after me when I walked out.

My walk along Rome Alley had left me four blocks from my Plymouth. During the walk back to it I glanced over my shoulder several times, but saw no sign of the two men.

However, I did experience a momentary feeling that I was being followed just before I reached the drive leading into *El Patio's* ground. In the rear-view mirror I glimpsed

an ancient Dodge touring car about two cars back, and realized I had spotted it in the mirror twice before. When it drove on by as I turned into the drive, I decided it was my imagination again.

It was just six o'clock when I turned my Plymouth over to a parking lot attendant.

Inside I told the head waiter not to disturb Fausta, and had him get me a table near the door leading back to Fausta's office. By a quarter of seven I had finished dinner, paid my check so that I wouldn't have that delay if I had to leave suddenly, and I spent the next fifteen minutes smoking a cigar and sipping a second cup of coffee.

At exactly seven the two men came into the dining room from the archway into the cocktail lounge. As Fausta had said, there was nothing particularly distinctive about either, unless you want to count a complete lack of facial expression. They were both dark, smooth-skinned men of average height and build, and both were dressed in expensively-tailored suits.

The older man, whom I judged to be about thirty, stopped in the archway and looked over the crowd with incurious eyes while the younger one made his way across the dining room. He passed within three feet of me and disappeared through the door into the back hall. In exactly three minutes by my watch he was back.

I was right behind the men when they went through *El Patio's* front door and handed their car claim check to the doorman. I gave him mine also. While we waited for our cars to come around, I paid no attention to them and they afforded me the same treatmnt.

My 1950 Plymouth arrived right behind their brand new Buick. Until the Buick passed between the stone pillars marking the entrance to *El Patio's* drive, I stayed within feet of its rear bumper. Then, making a mental note of the license number, I let the interval lengthen until I barely had it in sight.

Apparently the extortionists were so confident they had their victims completely cowed, they had no fear of being tailed. Not once glancing back, they crossed town at a moderate speed and parked in front of a rooming house on North Eighth Street. I pulled over to the curb a half block back, waited until they had entered the house and then sauntered past it.

The number, I noted, was 819 North Eighth. Pausing to touch flame to a fresh cigar, I glanced at the Buick out of the corner of my eye. The windows were rolled up. Quickly glancing at the house and seeing no evidence that I was observed, I checked the car doors and discovered they were locked. That probably meant they were through with the car for the night, I guessed, which in turn meant the rooming house was not just another shakedown call, but was home.

As that was all the information I wanted at the moment, I started back toward my Plymouth. But I only made it half way.

From a tree on one side of the walk and from a doorway on the other two shapes drifted toward me in the gathering dusk. I was just raising my cigar to my lips, and by the time I had dropped it and started to reach for my armpit, it was too late. A gun barrel pressed into my right kidney.

"Straight ahead, mister," a soft voice said in my ear.

We took their car instead of my Plymouth, and it was the same ancient Dodge touring car I had spotted behind me just as I reached *El Patio*. When I discovered my captors were the same two men I had seen in the drug store, my ego took a drop. I like to think I am a hard person to tail, but apparently these two had been behind me ever since I left Rome Alley.

Relieving me of my P-38, they blindfolded me.

The ride was merely a long series of meaningless twists and turns to me. When we finally stopped, I had not the faintest idea where we were. They led me from the car, I heard a door open, and we went down some stairs into what, from the noticeably cooler temperature, I guessed to be a cellar.

Someone removed my wallet from my hip pocket. Apparently its contents were examined, for I heard a mumbled discussion among several men in which my name was mentioned twice. Then the wallet was returned to my pocket, I was pushed into a hard wooden chair and the blindfold was removed.

I was seated directly under a large-watt electric bulb which was shaded by a conical enameled shade such as you usually see over pool tables. This bathed me in bright light, but left the surrounding area in shadow. Blinking at the light, I could see nothing but the legs of the group of men surrounding me. There must have been at least fifteen.

Behind me an unnaturally deep voice with a strong Italian accent said, "We know from your papers you are a private detective named Manville Moon. Today you ask many questions about the Mafia, Mr. Moon. Now we like to ask you some."

I said, "Who are you?"

"You would know if you see me, Mr. Moon. I am one of the merchants you ask for tribute. I am also what you might call the leader."

I probed my mind to place the voice, but it was no use. Obviously its unnatural deepness was a disguise, and the man might have been any of a dozen restaurant owners, fruit dealers or barbers I had talked to that day.

"Hold out your left arm," the voice ordered.

When I obeyed, a shirt-sleeved man whose sleeves were rolled to his biceps stepped forward. The light shade hung even with his chest, so

that even when he was within a foot of me, I could not see his face. Taking hold of my left arm, he shoved the sleeve back nearly to my elbow and examined the bare flesh.

Glancing at his own bare left forearm, I suddenly understood what he was looking for, because the underside of his bore a small scar in the shape of a cross. Vaguely I remembered somewhere acquiring the knowledge that part of the Mafia initiation ceremony is the gashing of the left forearm in that manner in order to let the blood which is supposed to seal the blood oath.

Dropping my arm, the man said, "He is not of the Mafia," and stepped back to take his place in the encircling ring.

"No, I'm not of the Mafia," I announced, deciding that if my captors were going to kill me, I might as well have the pleasure of telling them what I thought of their cloak and dagger outfit first. "I've just been checking up on your extortion racket. It must take a lot of bravery to belong to a secret gang which demands tribute from its own countrymen on the threat of death."

For a long time there was silence. Then the voice from behind me said, "I think you do not understand the Mafia, Mr. Moon. It is part of our way of life. It has been used for evil, but it is not in itself an evil thing. Here it is only an instrument of justice."

"Sure," I sneered. "The kind of justice that takes from the rich to give to the poor. The poor in this case being members of the Mafia. Who do you think you're kidding? I could name at least three of your fellow Italians you've been knocking down for tribute."

"Name them."

I managed a forced laugh. "And have them bumped off? No thanks. None of them squealed anyway. I ran across your racket by accident."

"You have proof?"

"Oh, come off it," I said irritably. "I tailed two of your pickup men only this evening. Matter of fact, your gunnies nailed me just after I'd run them to ground."

"You know the names of these men?"

"No," I admitted. "That was to be my next move. All I got was their address and the license number of their Buick. 819 North Eighth. License X-223740. But from that you ought to be able to figure out which of your pickup men I was on."

Again there was a long silence, then the leader behind me issued an order in such a low voice I failed to catch it. A moment later the blindfold was being refitted to my eyes.

Again I was taken for a long, winding ride in what I recognized from the wheeze of its motor as the same old Dodge touring car. When we stopped and the blindfold was removed, I discovered we were double parked next to my Plymouth and I was in the company of the

same two middle-aged men who had originally picked me up. One of them handed me the clip to my P-38, told me to put it in my pocket, and when I complied, gave me back my gun. I put it back under my arm.

Then he motioned me out of the car. As I stood in the street, staring at the two men without comprehension, they nodded impersonally and drove off. I noted the rear license was so coated with mud, it was indecipherable.

When I checked my wallet, I found the contents intact.

The whole thing was too much for me. I drove home and went to bed.

Next morning I was routed out of bed at eight o'clock by a phone call from Warren Day. "I want you at the morgue immediately," he growled.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm not dead yet."

"I'm in no mood for wise cracks, Moon!" he yelled. "You be at the morgue in thirty minutes, or I'll send the paddy wagon."

I got to the morgue in thirty minutes.

Day was already waiting. Grunting a noncommittal greeting, he led me into the cold room and over to two sheet-covered figures on marble slabs. Both sheets he pulled back only far enough to disclose the faces.

Carefully I did not change expression when I recognized them as the two men I had tailed from *El Patio* to the rooming house on Eighth.

"What makes you think I know them?" I asked.

"You were asking me questions about the Mafia, and these are the first Mafia killings in this town in twenty years."

"How do you know they're Mafia killings?"

In answer he stripped the sheets all the way down. My stomach turned over when I saw the gaping holes in the chests of the two men.

Their hearts had been cut completely from the bodies.

Reaching over first one corpse and then the other, I raised the left arms and examined their under sides.

"These guys didn't belong to the Mafia," I said. "Mafia members all have a crossed scar on the left forearm."

I could have explained to the inspector right then and there what had happened, but I didn't see what it would accomplish. I doubted that he would even believe me.

In a definite tone I said, "I'm sorry I can't help you, Inspector, but I don't know who either of these men are."

I didn't in the sense that I didn't know their names, and there was nothing Warren Day could do about it but growl at me a bit and let me go. He would have growled even more had I told him the truth. For I realized I had condemned the two men to death.

Even now it is difficult for me to understand how a group of respectable Italian merchants could be so

steeped in the traditions of the Mafia that they would so ruthlessly avenge the misuse of the Mafia's name. None of the men who had ringed me the previous night had ever before committed a crime, I am now sure. Yet the blood oath, probably taken by some as long as twenty, or even forty years ago, held in the face of all other law.

I tried to visualize the mental processes of the honest barbers and restaurant owners and grocers as they reached one-by-one into a hat to withdraw a small ball, each hoping his would be white instead of black, but each steeled to perform his sworn duty if the lot fell his way.

I felt a little sick when I realized my experience of the night before had been in the nature of a trial, and if the local Mafia had decided that, on the evidence, I was using its name for extortion purposes, my own heart would now be separate from my body.



Panic

It was silly to be afraid of the old man. But the scythe he carried was long and sharp and dangerous . . .

BY GRANT COLBY



SHE HATED to ride in streetcars, and she especially hated it when she had to sit on one of the long seats at the rear, the ones that faced each other across the aisle. Usually, she walked home from her job at the post office, but today she'd gone to work with a sore throat, and during the afternoon it had grown worse. When her supervisor discovered she couldn't talk above a whisper, she'd been sent home on sick leave. She hadn't felt up to the long walk, and there had been no empty cabs, so the streetcar had been her only choice.

She opened the top button of her blouse and closed her eyes a moment, wondering if the slight dizziness she felt was due to her fever or the stifling August heat.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the man. He was standing directly across from her, next to the rear door. An old man, tall, but very thin and a trifle stooped. His hair was a dirty white and there was a heavy gray stubble on his chin. He was wearing a

sweat-darkened blue shirt and frayed denim pants. There was a pair of pruning shears tucked into his belt, and in his right hand he held a large grass sickle. He was staring fixedly at the top of her blouse.

She frowned her annoyance, but the old man's eyes never wavered. She reached up and buttoned the blouse, looking at him as coldly as she could. Old men disgusted her, and on days when she wasn't feeling well, they disgusted her even more.

The old man's eyes moved slightly, and now she realized that he had not been looking directly at the top of her blouse. His eyes were deep set, heavily overhung by the gray eyebrows. The direction of his gaze had been deceptive. Actually, she knew, he had been staring past her shoulder, probably watching the traffic down in the street. In the instant it took her to realize her mistake, the old man's eyes moved again, and now he was looking directly into her own. She saw his eyes narrow slightly, and his lips tighten, and it came to her that she was still giving him the same cold look she'd given him when she thought he was staring at her opened blouse.

She started, and smiled quickly, making it an apology, reproaching herself for being so prone to assume something that probably hadn't entered the old man's mind.

She glanced about her. All of the seats were taken, but only the old man was standing. There was a middle-aged man, very fat, sitting beside her, and a small boy across from her. All the other passengers, here in the rear of the car, were women.

She became aware of movement in front of her, and looked up. The old man was standing directly in front of her now. He was staring at her unblinkingly, and now his eyes were cold and his lips compressed into a thin, hard line. She could smell him now, the sweat and the whiskey and the sharp, sweet odor of fresh-cut grass.

She turned her face away, and suddenly the thin film of perspiration on her shoulders grew chill. She had offended him, she knew. He had been looking out the window, and had happened to glance at her while she was giving him the coldest look of which she was capable. And before she turned her face away, she had discovered that, up close like this, he no longer seemed so old. He was about sixty-five, she guessed, but he wasn't at all like the older men she knew in offices. He was like her Uncle Carl, a farmer. Her Uncle Carl was sixty-five, and yet he worked hard every day. He was still strong. This was the same kind of man — old, but with a lot of strength in his thin body.

She let her gaze move back toward him. Light glinted dully on the grass sickle. It had a wide curved blade with tiny bits of grass adhering to it. The hand that held it was brown and strong-looking, and she could tell from the way his wrist

corded that the man was gripping the handle of the sickle with all his strength.

It's just my imagination, she told herself. I've got a fever, and I feel a little guilty for looking at him that way. That's all. He's just another old man that makes a living cutting grass and shrubbery for people out in the suburbs, like all those other old men I see working out there.

She forced another smile to her lips and looked up at the old man again.

He was smiling too, but it was like no smile she had ever seen before. It brought a clutch of fear to her stomach.

God, she thought, I've got to get out of here. I've *got* to.

When the streetcar started to slow for the next stop, she tried to rise. But the old man was leaning over her, blocking her way. She hesitated, then slid along the seat. The old man took a long step, keeping directly in front of her. When she tried again to get to her feet, the old man brought the grass sickle up so that it was only inches from her face. She saw the gleam of the honed cutting edge, and abruptly she felt too weak to stand. She sank back against the seat, breathing rapidly, a dull pain in her chest.

The pain in her chest seemed to spread. There was an ache behind her eyes now, and her teeth began to hurt. She moistened her lips, glancing about her. Everyone was looking at the old man. Everyone but the little boy across the aisle. He was asleep, his head resting against his mother's arm. The women in the rear of the car all had the same expression of fear, their faces frozen as if they were afraid of diverting the old man's attention to themselves. The woman with the little boy had her arm around him, her body a little in front of him, as if to shield him.

She looked at the fat, middle-aged man beside her. He was sweating, and his lips were pale. He met her eyes a moment, and then his eyes crawled away. He was afraid, she knew. They were all afraid. They had seen what had happened, and they were all so terrified of the gleaming sickle that they dared not move or speak.

The streetcar started up again. It was stopping only every two blocks now. At the next stop, the woman with the little boy suddenly grabbed him up in her arms and darted for the door. It seemed to unfreeze the other passengers, and they followed her. None of them said anything. None of them looked at the old man with the sickle. The fat man beside her seemed undecided for a moment, and then he too got up and left the car.

She looked toward the front of the car. None of the passengers facing the front had noticed anything. They were talking, reading newspapers, oblivious to what was occurring in the rear of the car.

The minutes dragged by, while

her terror mounted and the old man stood above her, swaying slightly with the motion of the car.

They reached the last stop before the end of the line, and the old man turned suddenly and left the car.

She stared after him a moment, and then put her hands to her face and tried to choke back the sobs. She felt the warm trickle of tears through her fingers, and took out her handkerchief to dry her eyes. She got off at the last stop and, half blindly, started running back in the direction they had come, toward the police station house a block away.

The streets out here were deserted, and when she realized this she lifted her skirts and ran as fast as she could. As she passed the end of a high, ornamental hedge, a foot went out and she pitched headlong to the sidewalk. She felt herself grabbed by the hair, and the next instant she had been jerked back behind the hedge. The old man was above her, breathing hard, sweat streaming from his face.

She opened her mouth to scream, forgetting that the sore throat had taken her voice. There was a rush of air past her lips, and that was all.

The old man held on to her hair, while with the other hand he drew the grass sickle back to his shoulder.

"So you thought you'd turn me in!" he said, his voice ragged. "You just couldn't run back to that station house fast enough, could you?"

She tried to break his hold on her hair, but he was too strong. He threw one leg across her body, pinioning her to the ground.

"You made me, didn't you?" he said. "I seen you looking at me that way. I knew you'd spotted me, when I saw that hard look. I seen you coming out of that post office, too. You saw my Wanted dodger on the bulletin board, and you spotted me the second I got on that streetcar."

"No!" she whispered hoarsely. "God, no! I —"

He jerked her head savagely to one side. "You read all about how they wanted me for murder, damn you!"

"No!"

"Well, you ain't putting *me* in no chair. Nobody as dumb as you is going to help fry me, by God. I knew you'd have to get off at the end of the line, so I just got off at the stop before that and run along behind the hedges till I found a proper spot to wait for you. I knew damn well you'd head straight back to the station house."

"Please, please . . ." She tried to say something else, but the words would not come. She was still trying when the grass sickle sliced through her throat and into the earth beneath it.



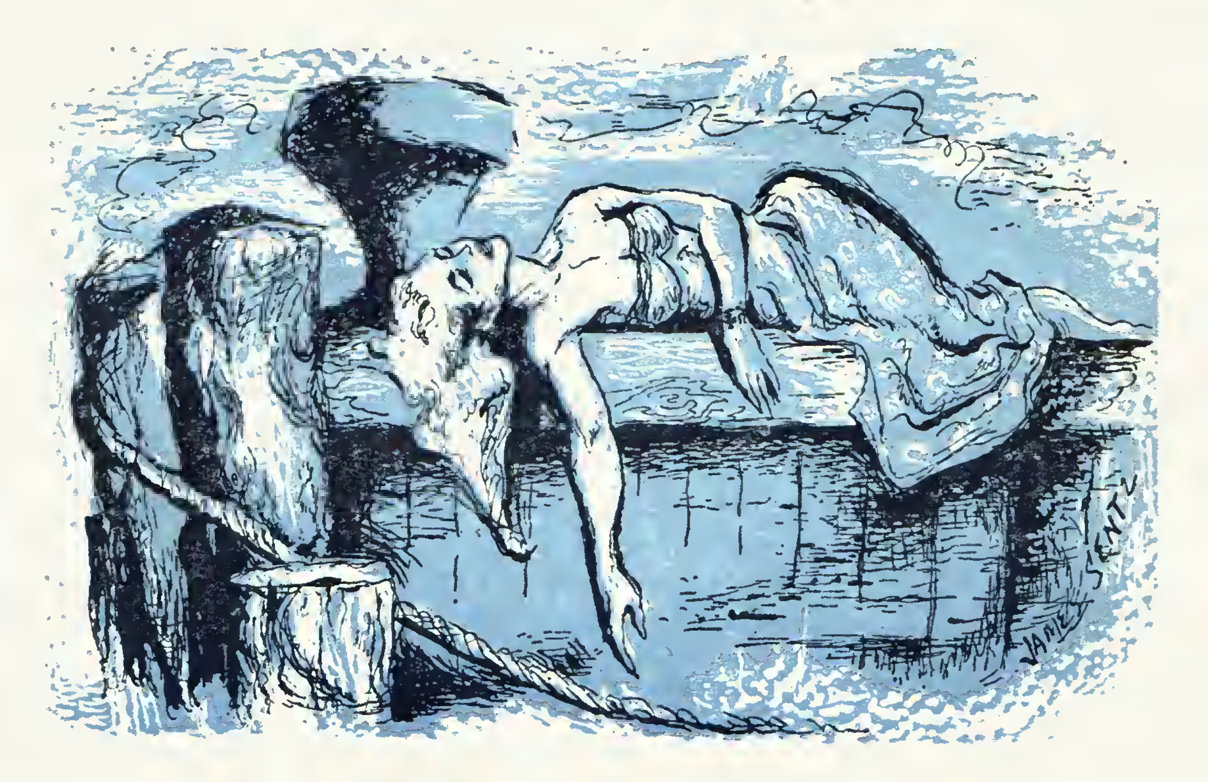
The girl had tried very hard to be lucky, but it hadn't done much good. When the cops found her, she was dead.

A Novelette

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

She was a small girl, and she looked even smaller, lying there at the river end of the vast, empty pier. A tugboat captain had sighted her body off Pier 90, radioed the Harbor Precinct, and a police launch had taken her from the water and brought her ashore. There was a chill wind blowing in from the Hudson and the pale October sun glinted dully on the girl's face and arms and bare shoulders. The skirt of her topless dress was imprinted with miniature four-leaf clovers and

The Floater



horseshoes and number 7's, and on her right wrist there was a charm bracelet with more four-leaf clovers and horseshoes.

A sergeant and three patrolmen from the Uniform Force had arrived in an RMP car a few minutes before my partner, Paul Brader, and I. They had just finished their preliminary examination of the body.

The sergeant glanced at me and then back down at the girl. "They'd didn't do her a hell of a lot of good, did they? The lucky symbols, I mean."

"Not much," I said.

"How old do you figure her for, Jim?" Paul Brader asked.

"Eighteen, maybe," I said. "No more than that."

"Well, we've got a homicide all right," Paul said. "She sure wasn't alive when she hit the water. You notice the skin?"

I'd noticed. It wasn't pale, the way it would have been had she drowned. The river water was cold, and cold water contracts the blood vessels and forces the blood to the inner part of the body.

"And there's no postmortem lividity in the head and neck," Paul went on. "Floaters always hang the same way in the water, with the head down. If she had been alive when she went in, she'd be a damned sight less pretty than she is now." He stepped close and knelt beside the girl. "How long would you say she was in the water, Jim?"

"That's always tough to figure," I said. "Taking the weather into consideration, and the fact that she's a little thin, I'd say anywhere from three to five days." I looked at the sergeant. "Any label in that dress, Ted?"

"No, sir."

"How about the underclothes?"

"Just brand names. No shop names at all."

Paul gently rolled the girl over on her left side. "Take a look at these lacerations on the back of her head," he said.

I knelt down beside him. There were two lacerations, apparently quite deep, and about three inches long. But lacerations and other mutilations of bodies found in the water are often misleading. Marine life takes its toll, and bodies frequently bob for hours against pilings and wharves and the sides of boats before they are discovered.

"We'll have to wait and see what the M.E.'s shop says about those," I said. I looked at both the girl's palms. There were no fingernail marks, such as are usually found in drownings. It's true that drowning people clutch at anything; and when there's nothing to grasp, they clench their hands anyhow, driving the nails into the flesh.

The girl had pierced ears, and the small gold rings in them appeared expensive. So did the charm bracelet, and the dress was obviously no bargain-counter item. There were four dollar bills tucked into the top of one of her stockings.

The uniformed sergeant removed the jewelry and the bills and listed them on his report sheet. "Four bucks," he murmured. "Mad money, probably."

Paul and I straightened up. "You want to wait for the doc?" he asked.

"Not much point," I said. "He won't be able to tell us anything until after he autopsies her. We don't need him to tell us we got a homicide."

"No I guess not," Paul said. He stared down at the girl a moment. "Tough, Jim. There's something about pulling a pretty girl out of cold water that gets me. Every time."

I nodded, and we turned back toward our prowl car. I knew what he meant. We handle about four hundred floaters a year in New York, most of them in the spring and summer. The majority of them are accidental drownings. A number are suicides, though there are fewer than is generally supposed. An even smaller number are homicides. And of the homicides, only about one in ten are women.

I got behind the wheel and we drove along the pier and turned downtown toward Centre Street, where the Missing Persons Bureau is located.

"You going to hit the station house first?" Paul asked.

"No. We can call in from the Bureau. I've got a hunch we'll save time if we go through the MP reports ourselves." The first thing a detective does when he has an unidentified body — provided it's a homicide and the body has been dead more than a day or so — is check the reports of missing persons. In the event of a routine drowning, the investigating officer's report is sent to the Bureau and the description matched against MP reports by MP personnel.

2.

We found the matching MP report almost at once.

POLICE DEPARTMENT
City of New York
REPORT OF MISSING PERSON

Surname:	First Name, Initials:	Sex:	Age:
TAYLOR	LUCILLE, M.	F.	19

Address:	Date and Time Seen:
751 W. 72nd	10/11/54, 8 P.M.

Last seen at:
LEAVING HOME ADDRESS

Probable Destination:	Cause of Absence:
UNKNOWN	UNKNOWN

I scanned the rest of the MP form. It was all there — a close physical description of the girl, the skirt with the lucky symbols, the pierced ears and gold earrings, the charm bracelet. There was, however, one item of jewelry listed on the report which had not been on the girl when she'd been taken from the river. A diamond engagement ring, assumed to be about half a carat.

"You were off a year on the age, Jim," Paul said, grinning.

"All right, so fire me," I said.

"I'll take it up with the commissioner," he said. "You want me to handle the ID confirmation?"

"Might as well," I said. "No use both of us killing time with it." I glanced down at the bottom of the form. The report had been phoned in by a Mrs. Edward Carpenter, with the same address as the girl's. Mrs. Carpenter, it seemed, was the girl's aunt. I wrote down the name and address on a piece of scratch paper and handed it to Paul. "I'll make a deal with you," I said. "You get Mrs. Carpenter and take her over to Bellevue for the ID, and I'll handle the paper work on this."

"All the way through?"

"Sure. What'd you think?"

"You've got yourself a deal. You want me to take her home, after the ID?"

"Nope. Take her to the precinct. . . . That's if she isn't too upset. If she takes it too hard, drive her home and call me from there."

"Anything else?"

"Well, you might get her to fill you in on the girl, if you can. Don't push too hard, unless you think she can take it."

He nodded. "You going back to the station house now?"

"Uh-huh. I'll ride that far with you, and then you can go on up to Seventy-second Street and get Mrs. Carpenter."

3.

Back in the squad room, I finished typing up some 61's in connection with other cases Paul and I were working on, completed several Wanted cards on a gang of Philadelphia hoods a stool had told me were now in New York, and then rolled a fresh 61 form into the Underwood and began the suspected homicide report on Lucille M. Taylor. I kept remembering how small she had looked there on the end of the big pier, and how angry the river had sounded as Paul and I stood there in the chill wind.

Paul came in an hour later. There were two people with him, a tall heavy-set blonde woman of about fifty and a small, wispy little guy with an almost completely bald head and eyes the color of faded blue denim. It took me a few moments to realize he was probably not much older than the woman. Of the two, the man seemed much the more upset.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter, Jim," Paul aid. "Folks, this is Detective Coren."

We all nodded to one another and I pushed two chairs close to my desk and asked them to sit down. Mrs. Carpenter frowned at the chair, rook a large, flowered handkerchief from her purse and dusted it thoroughly, and finally sat down. Mr. Carpenter watched her closely, biting his lip. He didn't sit down until she had settled herself. Paul

Brader leaned a hip against my desk and lit a cigarette. He extended the package to the Carpenters, but both shook their heads.

I could sense that there was no point in condolences, and I was relieved. I knew Paul hadn't got anything on the trip to Bellevue or he would have taken me aside and briefed me. Mrs. Carpenter was obviously the dominant member of the family, and I addressed my remarks to her.

"We'll make this just as short as we can," I said. "The first question, of course, is whether you know anyone who might have killed your niece."

She sat very straight, almost rigid, staring at me unblinkingly. "I'm sure I couldn't say."

"You reported her missing as of eight P.M. last Monday, and the time of your report was ten A.M. Tuesday. Was it unusual for Lucille to stay out all night?"

"It was the first time she'd ever done that. She would never have had the opportunity for a second time, I assure you."

"We'll want to notify her parents." I picked up a pencil. "What's their address?"

"They're dead. Lucille has been living with Mr. Carpenter and me ever since then. Almost a year now."

"Did she go on a date Monday night, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"I'm sure I don't know. We'd had very little to say to one another the last few weeks."

"You have no idea at all where she was going? No idea whom she might have planned to meet?"

"None at all."

"Was she wearing a coat or jacket when she left?"

"I told them what she was wearing when I called to report her missing. If she'd been wearing a coat, I would have said so."

"It's been very chilly the last week or so. I thought you might have forgotten —"

"I forgot nothing."

I looked at Mr. Carpenter. "How about you, sir? Do you have any idea of whom Lucille planned to see that night?"

"He knows nothing about it," Mrs. Carpenter said crisply.

Mr. Carpenter glanced furtively at her, then dropped his eyes and shook his head. "She didn't mention," he said.

I turned back to Mrs. Carpenter. "You said she was wearing a diamond engagement ring when she left. There was no such ring on her hand when we found her."

"She was wearing it when she left the house. I'm quite certain of it."

"Whose was it?"

"Why, her own, of course."

"I mean, who gave it to her? Who was the man?"

Mrs. Carpenter had very thin lips, and when she pursed them, as she did now, she gave the impression of having no lips at all. "I'm afraid I don't know," she said finally.

Paul Brader leaned forward. "Mrs. Carpenter, do you mean to tell us that your niece was engaged to a guy, wearing his ring, and you don't know who he was?"

Mrs. Carpenter took a deep breath, staring at Paul fixedly. "I don't like your tone, young man," she said. "I —"

"I'm sorry," Paul said. "It's just a little hard to understand, that's all."

"She began wearing the ring about a month ago. It was shortly after the time Lucille and I — well, you might say we stopped confiding in one another."

"And why was that?" Paul asked.

"Because I discovered certain things about her. At first I was of a mind to ask her to leave my house." She turned her head slightly to glare at her husband.

"You mind telling us a bit more about it?" I asked.

"Not at all. Why should I pretend to protect the reputation of a girl like Lucille? She was an extremely pretty girl. . . she liked to flaunt herself. Especially around Mr. Carpenter."

"Now, Cora . . ." Mr. Carpenter began.

"Please be still, Mr. Carpenter," she said coldly. "You've defended that disgraceful person often enough already."

"It just don't seem right somehow," he said. "Her being dead and all, and —"

"That'll do," Mrs. Carpenter said. She looked at me. "As I said, she flaunted herself. She thought nothing of going through the house in her slip, or parading from the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around her. Why, once she even —"

"We're interested only in finding the one who killed her, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Now, can you tell us anything else that might help? For instance, do you know whether she was in fear of anyone? Had she ever said anything at all that might give us a lead?"

"No, she never did. It seems quite plain to me that she was robbed."

"Why so?"

"Because she wore the ring when she left the house, and yet it was not on her finger when her body was found."

"A lot of things could have happened," I said. "Robbery's a possibility, of course."

A knowing look came into her eyes, and when she spoke there was a subtle suggestiveness to her voice. "Unless something *else* happened, that is. Unless, let us say, one of the people who found her took a fancy to the ring. It would be quite simple for him to appropriate it." She smiled faintly. "Such things have been known to happen, have they not?"

"Just a minute," Paul said sharply. "If you're trying to say that we —"

"Hold it, Paul," I said. "Mrs. Carpenter is just upset, that's all."

"I'm not in the least upset. I

never permit myself to become upset."

"About this man she was engaged to," I said. "We'll want to talk to him. Can you tell us anyone who might know who he is? Any girl friends Lucille had who might know?"

"She had few friends. Naturally, the way she twisted herself around, showing off all the time, she'd be lucky if decent girls even spoke to her."

"Did she have a job?"

"Yes. She worked for a photographer."

I lifted the pencil again. "Where?"

"His name is Schuyler. The studio is somewhere on Fifty-seventh Street."

"You know the address?"

"No, I don't. You'll have to look it up."

I studied her a moment. "Can you think of anything else that might help us, Mrs. Carpenter? Surely she mentioned friends or acquaintances. A young girl would have some social life. How about church groups, or clubs, or night courses at one of the colleges?"

"I've told you all I can," she said. "It was only during the last two or three months that she began going out much. Before that, she went out only now and then. And if she ever told me the names of any of her men friends, I've long since forgotten them."

"One more thing," I said. "She was nineteen, and she had a job. If things were strained between you two, why did she continue to stay with you?"

Again Mrs. Carpenter glared at her husband. "She didn't realize the full extent of my dislike, I'm quite sure. Mr. Carpenter prevailed on me not to ask her to leave. Then, too, we charged her considerably less for her board and room than she would have paid elsewhere. Even so, things were coming to a head. I had almost determined to give her notice."

I stood up. "I guess that'll be all, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Mr. Carpenter, will you come with me a moment?"

He glanced at his wife, as if for permission, and then he got slowly to his feet and followed me back through the squad commander's office to one of the interrogation rooms.

"We'll be only a moment," I said. "I wondered if you had anything to add." I grinned. "I thought maybe we could talk a bit more freely back here."

The expression on his face told me he was genuinely surprised to find that anyone was willing to show him any consideration.

"Cora's just plain wrong about Lucille," he said in a voice that sounded as if it were accustomed to making apologies. "Just plain wrong. Lucille was a pretty girl, and I reckon she knew it well enough, but she sure never did anything wrong around the house. She —

well, I guess she just figured I was her uncle, and that it wasn't a heck of a lot different than if it was her father. Maybe she did run around the house half naked sometimes, but she sure never done it for *my* benefit. She just never thought anything about it, that's all."

"I can understand why she might have kept things from your wife, Mr. Carpenter," I said, "but I thought she might have said something to you. About the man she was engaged to, I mean."

"Nope. She never did."

I nodded. "Can you think of anything that might help?"

"No, sir, I can't. Not a thing."

We went back to the squad room. I arranged for an unmarked car to take Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter home, and then I typed up the results of the interview and added them to the file on Lucille Taylor.

"That guy Carpenter bugs me a little," Paul said. "Being in the same house all the time with a girl like Lucille could give a man a lot of ideas. Maybe he got charged up, and she nixed him, and he got mad about it." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Or maybe she *didn't* nix him, and his wife found out about it, and *she* got mad."

"Could be," I said. "You feel like some coffee?"

"Always."

"Let's grab a cup, and then go see her boss." I found the address in the directory, and then Paul and I signed out and left the squad room.

4.

The Schuyler Studios, Inc. was on the fourth floor, with windows opening on Fifty-seventh Street. It was apparently a good-sized outfit, judging from the number of lettered doorways we passed on our way to the reception room. The reception room itself, however, was quite small. We told the male receptionist who we were, and after he'd talked a moment on an intercom, he led us back to Schuyler's private office.

"That'll be all, Mr. Stacy," he said, rising. "Won't you gentlemen sit down?"

We sat, and I told him our business. He was a big man, about forty, with hair grown gray at the temples and a face that would have been rugged except for the eyes. The eyes were strangely soft, with that moist sheen that women's eyes sometimes have. When I had finished, he picked up a letter opener from his desk and turned it over and over in his fingers, shaking his head slowly.

"It's hard to believe," he said. "She was such a young girl, and a very pretty one — and to die like that . . ."

"We're trying to get a line on her friends," I told him. "Can you help us?"

He thought a moment. "You know, that's very strange. She was a very quiet, unassuming girl, but quite personable. And yet, now that you ask, I can't remember her ever mentioning anyone."

"How about other employees here? She must at least have gone to lunch with someone."

"She was the only girl. All the rest are men. And I'm almost certain she never went to lunch with any of them. She wasn't exactly a cold person, but she did tend to keep aloof from the men here. I've heard them talking about her, now and then — as men will. I gathered that none of them had ever dated her, or in fact even talked to her very much, except as pertaining to business."

"How did you get along with her, Mr. Schuyler?"

"Quite well. I was very fond of her. She did her job, and my clients seemed to like her. Especially the women. And in this business, that's important. We deal with a great number of account executives and art directors, and many of them are women. Lucille was quite a favorite with them."

"You ever see her outside the office?"

His mouth tightened a little, but his eyes retained that almost feminine softness. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean, did you ever see her socially? Did you ever take her out?"

"That's a rather unusual question."

"There's nothing personal," I said. "We have to follow a certain routine, Mr. Schuyler."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, I suppose you do. The answer to your question is no. I have had a number of young women working for me, during the fifteen years I have owned this studio. I have made it a strict personal rule never to become involved, in even the most innocent way. Sometimes girls — especially ones as young as Miss Taylor — misinterpret a friendly interest. And even so, I am quite happily married. I have a daughter fifteen and another seventeen." He smiled, and the friendliness came back into his voice. "Does that answer your question?"

I nodded. "How long had she worked here, Mr. Schuyler?"

"Let's see . . . Oh, about three months. I can check and be exact, if you wish."

"That's close enough," I said.

"Wait!" He leaned forward. "Maybe I can help you after all. You asked about her friends. Well, up until about six weeks or two months ago Lucille used to receive calls from some man. Someone named Vince. He called quite often. I'd hear her mention his name when she said hello, of course."

"But he hadn't called her recently?"

"Not that I know of."

"Were their conversations friendly, would you say?"

"Yes. Judging from Lucille's tone of voice, I'd say they were a bit more than friendly — if you know what I mean."

"You ever hear her mention his last name?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I couldn't help but overhear, of course, but I didn't make a point of tuning in. I'd just hear her say 'Hello, Vince,' or 'Good-by, Vince,' — you know."

"Uh-huh. Can you think of anything else that might help us, Mr. Schuyler? You remember anything else from these telephone conversations — anything to indicate that she and this Vince might be planning to get married?"

"Married? Why, no. I'm sure she would have mentioned such plans to me, though. That is, if she planned to take some time off, rather than just quit outright. She'd almost have to, you know."

"Yeah. Well, is there anything you can tell us, Mr. Schuyler?"

"I only wish I could. As I said, I was very fond of Lucille. I'd be only too anxious to help, if I could."

On our way down in the elevator, Paul turned to me and grimaced. "A real cold fish," he said. "As long as something doesn't scratch him or his own family, he doesn't give a goddamn. But I'll bet if one of his daughters got looked at cross-eyed by some guy, he'd be after us to put the guy in the electric chair."

5.

We drove back to the station house, checked the message spike for calls, read the flimsies in the alarm book to see if there had been any new arrests or detentions that concerned us, and then I called the morgue at Bellevue to see how Lucille Taylor's autopsy was coming along.

The assistant M.E. to whom I talked said it had just been completed. The cause of death had been a severed spinal cord, resulting from a blow or blows to the back of the neck and head. The lacerations appeared to have been made with a blunt instrument, such as a length of two-by-four. One or more of the blows had dislocated the vertebrae enough to sever the cord, after which the vertebrae had slipped back into place. The assistant M.E. seemed quite pleased that he had discovered this so quickly.

I told Paul the result of the autopsy, changed the official designation of Lucille Taylor's file from "Suspected Homicide" to just plain "Homicide," and added the autopsy finding to the original Complaint Report form.

Then Paul and I got down to routine. We collected all the arrest records for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, divided them equally, and began going through them for pickups made near the Hudson River. It was our hope that Lucille's' killer might have been pulled in on some other charge after he had put Lucille in the water. There had been several pickups, but most of them had been too far downriver to look right for us.

Next, we checked the list of men pulled in for morning lineups, starting with the one held Tuesday morn-

ing. There was nothing for us there, either.

The phone on my desk rang and Paul, who was closer, answered it. He nodded to me, and I picked up an extension. It was Schuyler, the photographer for whom Lucille Taylor had worked.

"I'm afraid the shock of Lucille's death affected my memory," he said. "I've just recalled that I *did* hear her mention that man's name. That 'Vince' I told you about. I remember now that she called him once, while I happened to be passing near her desk. She asked someone to call him to the phone, and she used his full name. I don't know why, but for some odd reason the name seems to have stayed with me."

"Fine," Paul said. "What is it?"

"Donnelly. Vince Donnelly. I remember distinctly."

"Thanks very much, Mr. Schuyler," Paul said. "That's a real help."

"Well, I certainly hope so. It was unforgivable of me not to have thought of it sooner."

"It's only natural, sir," Paul said. "We appreciate your calling us." He spoke a moment longer, and then hung up.

"We've got a package on a guy by that name, Paul," I said.

"Yeah. I know. Want me to pull it?"

"Uh-huh. Seems to me he lives on Seventy-second Street, just the way Lucille did."

Paul went to the next room, brought back the package on Vince Donnelly, and put it down on my desk. "You're off again, Jim," he said. "He lives on Seventy-*third* Street."

"All right," I said. "So fire me again."

Vince Donnelly was twenty-three years old, had drawn a suspended sentence in 1950 on a grand larceny charge in connection with a stolen car, and had been convicted on a similar charge in 1951. He had done eighteen months. Since then he had been pulled in twice for questioning, but had not been booked. He lived less than two blocks from the address where Lucille Taylor had lived with her aunt and uncle.

"Maybe we've got ourselves a boy, Jim," Paul said.

"Maybe. Let's see what he's got to say."

6.

We spent the better part of two hours looking for Vince Donnelly, and then gave up and went back to the station house. Donnelly had moved from the Seventy-third Street address some two weeks before, and we were unable to turn up anyone who knew his present whereabouts.

I called Headquarters, gave them Donnelly's description, and asked that an alarm for him be sent out. In a few minutes the teletype machine in the squad room began to clack, and Paul and I walked over to it and watched the words form across the

paper, just as they were doing in all the other squad rooms in New York.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

ALARM 4191 CODE SIG L-1 AUTH HBR SQD. 4:31 P.M. HOLD FOR INTERROGATION — VINCENT C. DONNELLY — M-W-23-5-9-165 — LIGHT BROWN HAIR — BROWN EYES — MUSCULAR BUILD — BIRTHMARK OVER RIGHT EAR — SLIGHT LIMP — CLOTHING UNKNOWN BUT HAS REPUTATION AS FLASHY DRESSER.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

"I haven't eaten yet," Paul said. "How about some chow?"

I nodded. "Good idea."

"How about the Automat? I like those pecan rolls."

"Okay. Sign us out, will you, while I put Donnelly's package back in file?"

"Check."

When we got back to the squad room there were two messages for us. One was from Lieutenant Mason, at the Twentieth Precinct, saying they'd picked up Vince Donnelly and were holding him for us. The other was a note to call a Miss Peggy Webb, who had phoned to say she had important information in connection with Lucille Taylor's murder.

I called Miss Webb at the number she had given. She impressed me as intelligent and sincere, and very tense. She assured me she knew who had killed Lucille Taylor, but she said that she didn't want to talk about it over the phone. When I asked her to come down to the station house, she refused. I arranged to meet her at the entrance of the Jacoby Camera Supply, on Sixth Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth.

I told Paul about the call. "I guess we'll have to split up," I said. "You'd better get over to the Twentieth and start in on Donnelly. If this Webb girl has anything, I'll call you there."

"Sure," Paul said darkly. "Naturally. Of course. I go tangle with a damned punk, and you go off to see the girl. I sit over there in a hot squad room with a thief, and you sit in a nice cool bar, making time with . . ." He broke off, sighing. "I think I'll take it up with the commissioner."

I grinned. "You've got the commissioner on the brain."

"What brain? If I had a brain, I'd never have been a cop in the first place." He reached for his jacket. "Well, I'll get over there and see what gives with our friend Donnelly. Don't get lost with that girl, Jim."

"I'll try not to," I said.

7.

Peggy Webb turned out to be a very thin, very plain girl of about thirty. She kept twisting her handbag in her hands and, except for the moment it took me to introduce and

identify myself, she never met my eyes once.

"I read the story in the paper," she said, staring out at the traffic on Sixth. "Right away I knew who did it." She glanced at the doorway of the camera shop and then back at the traffic again. "I work here now. But I used to work for the Schuyler Studios. I worked there for four years — until Lucille came there."

I leaned back against the plate glass front of the shop, studying her. "Who do you think killed her?"

"Schuyler killed her."

"That's a pretty serious accusation, Miss Webb."

"I realize that."

"How do you know he killed her?"

"It had to be him. I know it, just as well as I know I'm standing here. It caught up with him, that's all."

"You mind explaining?"

"That's why I called you, isn't it? Schuyler and Lucille were having an affair. I was his right hand around that place for four years, and then one day Lucille shows up. Right off he starts breaking her in on my job. And that's not all. He started her in at more money than I made, after I'd been there four years. Oh, it made me sick to watch the two of them. They thought nobody knew what was up. But they were wrong. Here he was, more than twice her age, and she sitting there smiling so prissy and nice — it made me want to throw up." There was a hard set to her features now.

"Still," I said, "that's hardly — "

"Have you talked to Schuyler?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you he was married?"

"Yes."

"Did he also tell you that he was just a photographer's assistant, till he met his wife? Did he tell you that she was a very wealthy woman, and that he married her for her money? . . . No? No, of *course* he didn't." Her voice grew tighter. "He isn't dumb. Not that one. He wouldn't have let go of his wife any sooner'n he would let go a gold mine."

"I don't quite follow you," I said.

"Well, you'll soon begin to." She was staring at the knot in my tie now. "Why would a man buy a girl an engagement ring — if he was married to a gold mine, and meant to stay that way?"

"You mean he bought one for Lucille Taylor?"

"That's right. He bought it at Lormer's, on Fifth Avenue. They made a mistake somehow, and sent the bill to the office. I opened it, right along with all the other mail, and put it on his desk. About ten minutes later I overheard him giving Mr. Lormer hell. He said he'd specifically told the clerk there *not* to send a bill, either to his office or his home. He was so mad that he was almost shouting. And then, about two or three days later, Lucille shows up with a big diamond on her finger. When I asked her who the lucky man was, she just simpered like the

silly fool she was, and acted coy. I thought I'd have to go to the window and be sick."

"That's interesting," I said, "but it could have been a —"

"A coincidence? Oh, no — it was no coincidence. Schuyler bought that ring for Lucille, and she wore it. And if you were a woman, you'd know from the way she acted around there that she thought she and Schuyler were going to get married."

I thought it over.

"That's the whole thing, can't you see?" she asked. "Schuyler was after something, but he couldn't get it without promising to marry her. He wanted to have his cake and eat it too. I mean he didn't have any intention of giving up his wife's money, but he wanted Lucille. So he told her he was going to divorce his wife and marry her. He was just sharp enough, and she was just dumb enough, and he pulled it." Her eyes came up as far as my mouth, but no higher. "And that couldn't go on forever, could it? When it came to a showdown, and Schuyler had to admit that he'd been playing her for all he could get —" she shrugged — "well?"

"You didn't care much for Lucille, did you?"

"I loathed her."

"And Schuyler?"

She took a deep breath. "I — I guess I was in love with him once. But no more. After Lucille had been there a couple of months, he called me in and fired me. Just like that. He didn't even give me a reason — because there *was* no reason. He didn't need two girls, and so he just kicked me out on the street. Why, it was all I could do to get him to write a few references for me. And *that* after I'd been there all those years . . ."

I nodded. "A tough break, Miss Webb."

"When will you arrest him?"

"We'll talk to him again."

"But isn't it plain enough? What more could you possibly want?"

"We'll talk to him," I said again. I got out my notebook and took down Miss Webb's address and phone number.

"I see I've wasted my time," she said.

"Not at all," I said, making it friendly. "I'm very grateful to you. As I said, we'll —" But she had turned quickly and was walking off down Sixth Avenue. Once she hesitated a moment, as if she might turn back, but then she went on again, walking even more rapidly than before.

I went into a drug store and called the Twentieth Precinct. Paul Brader told me that Vince Donnelly hadn't opened his mouth, except to demand a lawyer. Paul had been able, through other sources, to establish that he was the same Vince Donnelly who had gone around with Lucille Taylor, but that was all. We had nothing at all on Donnelly, and unless we came up with something

within the next few hours we'd have to let him go.

"I got a feeling about this guy," Paul said. "I think we're on our way."

"Yeah? Why so?"

"I just sort of hunch it, that's all."

"Well, keep at him. I'm going to check out a couple things with Schuyler, and then I'll be over to help you."

He laughed. "Schuyler — or the girl?"

"Schuyler."

"Okay. See you later."

I hung up, located the after-business-hours number of the Lormer Jewelry Shop in the directory, and finally got through to Mr. Lormer himself. He lived in a hotel on Lexington Avenue, and asked me to come up. From him I learned that the diamond engagement ring, while large, had been of the lowest quality he carried. I asked if Schuyler had brought a young woman to the shop for a fitting, and Mr. Lormer said no. Schuyler had asked that the engagement ring be made up in the same size as a small intaglio he wore on the little finger of his left hand. And then — very reluctantly — Mr. Lormer told me that Schuyler had returned the ring yesterday morning. He had not wanted a cash refund, but had applied the refund value of the ring against two jewelled wrist watches, to be delivered to his two daughters.

I took Mr. Lormer to his shop, impounded the ring, signed a receipt for it, and took him back home. Then I drove to Seventy-second Street and got a positive identification of the ring from Lucille Taylor's aunt and uncle.

I located Schuyler's home address in the directory, picked up Paul Brader at the Twentieth, and we drove downtown toward Schuyler's apartment house.

8.

In his office, Schuyler had been as cool as they come. Standing in the doorway of his apartment, with his wife and daughters just behind him, he was something else again. We had counted on surprise and the presence of his family to unnerve him, and we weren't disappointed. He had divided his life into two parts, and we had suddenly brought the parts together. He stared first at Paul and then at me, moistening his lips.

I had the engagement ring in the palm of my hand, and now I opened my fingers slowly and let him see it.

"What is it, dear?" his wife asked, and one of the girls moved a little closer, her eyes questioning me.

"I — I can't talk here," Schuyler said, in what he probably thought was a whisper. "My God, I —"

"Get your coat," I said.

He nodded rapidly. "Yes, yes — of course."

We rode down in the self-service elevator, phoned in a release for Vince Donnelly, and crossed the street to the RMP car. Paul got be-

hind the wheel and I got into the back seat with Schuyler. Paul eased the car out into the heavy Lexington Avenue traffic.

"We have the ring, Mr. Schuyler," I said. "We got a positive identification of it. You returned it *after* Lucille Taylor had been murdered. We'll have no trouble taking it from there. Not a bit. We'll put a dozen men on it. We'll work around the clock. We'll get a little here, and a little there — and pretty soon we'll have you in a box. The smartest thing you can do — the *only* thing you can do — is make it a little easier on yourself." I paused. "And make it a little easier on your family."

"My girls!" Schuyler said. "My God, my girls!"

"Tell us about the other girl," I said softly. "Tell us about Lucille."

It was a long moment before he could keep his voice steady. "She threatened me," he said at last. "She said she was going to my wife and daughters and tell them about — about us. I knew I could have patched it up with my wife, but — my daughters . . . God, I —"

"You admitted to Lucille that you'd never intended to divorce your wife and marry her?"

He nodded almost imperceptibly. "I had grown a little tired of her. She was pretty, but so — so immature. I told her, and she became enraged. I was surprised. I hadn't thought she was capable of so much fury. We had walked down Seventy-second Street to the river. We were sitting on one of those benches down there, watching the tugboats. When I told her, she began to curse me. She was almost screaming. I couldn't see anyone else nearby, but I was afraid someone would hear her. I tried to calm her, but she got almost hysterical. Then she slapped me, and I grabbed her. I — I don't know just what happened then, but somehow I made her head hit the back of the bench. And then I kept doing it — kept beating her head against the back of the bench." Suddenly he covered his face with his hands and his body slumped. "And then — and then I carried her to the railing across from the bench and threw her into the water."

I watched the neon streaming by. "But not before you stripped that ring off her finger, Schuyler," I said. "You sure as hell didn't forget the ring, did you?"

He didn't say anything.

As we neared the Harbor Precinct, I could hear a tugboat whistle, somewhere out there on the cold Hudson, a deep, remote blast that was somehow like a mockery.

"God," Schuyler murmured. "My poor girls, my poor little girls . . ."

And don't forget poor little Lucille Taylor, I thought, while you're feeling sorry for your victims.



Jim's wife didn't mind if he left her alone. She was very understanding. That's what began to bother Jim . . .

Green Eyes

BY HAL ELLSON

NO SOUND, no movement anywhere, then a perceptible awakening. A breath of wind, a palm frond moving, and shadows thickening below the hotel balcony. Jim Withers sat forward and watched the white-clad figure climbing the steep road toward the hotel. Even at that distance he recognized the man and frowned. In another moment he leaned forward again and nodded his head in sign of grudging respect for the one in white. The chap was running up the hill.



But why not? The natives were capable of feats that could stun, if not kill, anyone else. But this Juan. . . . Jim sat back once more and wiped the perspiration from his face. The wind had faded, evening brought no relief from the fierce tropic heat. He closed his eyes, steps on the tiled floor alerted him. Seconds later a pair of cool hands pressed against his eyes. An exotic bouquet floated around him.

As he broke free and turned, Kathy smiled, beautiful and cool-looking in white. "Lazy-bones, sleeping again?" she said.

"No, thinking of when we're leaving this place."

"But how can you say that? I could stay forever in Acapulco."

"Then it'll have to be without me."

"Fresh," she said and laughed in a way that set his pulse racing. A wild surging desire made him want to crush her in his arms, but she stepped back, as if she had read his mind, and said, "We'd better dine, don't you think?"

"Have to wash up," he mumbled, rising from the chair. Then, escorting her as far as the stairs, he went to their room, washed quickly and hurried to the upper balcony.

In that brief interval a swift transition had taken place. The night had closed in, a vast canopy stretched overhead; on the slope of the hill below the balcony nothing but silence.

Jim sat down abruptly. "You're out of sorts," Kathy said, watching him.

"No, it's the heat," he lied. For he could bear with that, but to have found Juan with Kathy was too much. As Juan had gone back to the kitchen, Jim said, "He's altogether too friendly."

Kathy opened her eyes wide, innocently. "You mean Juan?"

"And who else would I be talking about?"

"Oh, he doesn't mean anything. He's just friendly." She was smiling now. "But don't tell me — it's not really jealousy."

"Jealousy, hell!"

"Hush."

Warned, Jim turned his head. Others were arriving. A table for two. He nodded to the couple and turned back to Kathy.

"From Michigan. They motored down. Very nice people," she whispered.

Then Juan appeared from the kitchen bearing a large tray. He smiled. "And how are you this evening, Mr. Withers?" His white teeth flashed, his smooth brown skin gleamed. Not a drop of sweat on his face after that run up the hill.

Jim nodded, unable to speak. Juan set him on edge. All eyes for Kathy as he served, his words directed at her. She appeared delighted by his attention.

"Are you going fishing tomorrow?"

Both of them were looking at Jim now and he appeared almost stunned.

"I hadn't thought of it for tomorrow," he finally answered.

"But why wait?"

"Yes, why wait?" said Kathy. "Wasn't it one of the reasons you came?"

"If you go in a big boat," Juan was saying, "very big fish. Sailfish, swordfish, anything you can name."

"And any price the boatman can name too."

"Ah, but you are rich."

Kathy laughed with delight at this remark.

"All Americans are not rich, particularly this one," said Jim.

Exchanging glances with Kathy, Juan only smiled and said, "If you wish, I can make the necessary arrangements."

Jim finally conceded. "All right, tomorrow, at what time?"

"At six it is best for hooking the big ones."

"Make it seven."

Juan shrugged. "As you wish. The boys will be waiting at Caleta Beach. Ask for Rodriquez."

Juan returned to the kitchen. Voices in heated argument made Jim turn. No door to the kitchen. He saw a barefooted Indian woman — the cook — berating Juan.

"That old devil's at it again."

"Well, she has work to do and he's holding her up."

"I still don't like her."

"And him?"

Kathy's eyes widened. "But don't be silly, Jim. He's cute, that's all."

Jim picked up his fork, not caring to pursue the subject. The food was excellent, as always, not to be ignored.

"You know," he said, "that's the most remarkable thing about this place."

"What is?"

"The food. No two meals alike, a kind of endless variety and perfection."

"I hate to admit it, but the old she-devil does wonders."

"Probably no one appreciates it, either."

At that moment Juan arrived back at the table, apparently not upset by the argument with the cook. "A bottle of Bohemia," said Jim. "And if you don't mind, tell the cook that my wife and I are in love with her cooking."

After what had taken place, another man would have at least hesitated before such a request, but Juan smiled, as if sharing in the compliment, and went immediately to the kitchen. Watching, Jim saw the Indian woman turn her ugly pock-marked face and smile at him.

Juan returned with the bottle of Bohemia. As Jim poured the light golden beer, he said, "Coming along tomorrow, Kathy?"

"Fishing? Are you out of your mind, Jim?"

"It was just an idea."

2.

After dinner, a few couples gathered on the lower balcony. Intensely dark now, a soft wind from the sea,

palms stirring, the lizards darting at insects lured by the lights. Utter silence in the shadowed jungle on the slope below the balcony.

Kathy had left with the other couples to join the Canasta players in the lobby. Jim leaned over the railing. Looking down, he saw a light flash. Nothing then, but he knew of the forlorn native shacks hidden below. The cook, and perhaps Juan lived in one of them.

Jim turned away, thought of Juan rousing his anger. What does Kathy see in him? he asked himself, starting for the hall that led to the lobby. There he found the Canasta players at their tables but not Kathy. Gone to the room, he thought, and he walked through the open lobby, then down the front steps.

Palms shadowed the driveway. A night-bird cried out. About to light a cigarette, Jim turned and saw a white-clad figure jump from the small balcony of his own room and quickly disappear. In the next second he turned round, mounted the steps and hurried through the lobby.

"Kathy?" The door was locked. He rattled the knob. Footsteps, and the door swung open. No light in the room. He flipped the switch and stared at Kathy.

"Thought you were going to play cards?" he said, watching her eyes.

"I changed my mind and decided to lie down for a while."

Yes, with Juan, he thought. But when she stared innocently at him he went out to the balcony, dropped in a chair and lit a cigarette.

"What are you going to do out there?" Kathy asked.

"Sleep. I've a big day ahead tomorrow. Wish you'd come along."

No answer from Kathy.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"Perhaps I better not go."

"Don't spoil your fun because of me."

"Thanks." That said as if he meant it. Then: "Look, why not meet me at the beach with the camera just in case I hook a big one."

"What time?"

"Noon."

"I'll be there."

Hearing the door open, he turned and saw her smiling at him. "Now where are you going?" he asked.

"Canasta, dear. Bye!"

The door closed. He shot his cigarette away. Kathy had lied. He didn't want to believe it, the two of them together. A wild thought entered his mind. Capable of murder. He knew that now, but it was insane. Get away, he told himself. The plane to Mexico City tomorrow, anything to escape the precipice lying near in the dark.

A night-bird cried out in the palms, a wind from the sea. He closed his eyes, slept and woke again to that same mournful cry. Now stillness, everything dead, asleep. Turning, he saw a figure in white vanish behind a palm; he tried to rise and his tired eyes closed.

3.

He opened them again to the clear tropic light and profound stillness of morning, looked at his watch, stood up, passed through the shadowed room, empty lobby and hurried down the hill toward the beach. Halfway there and he met the Indian cook; a mirrored light flashed from a machete that hung from her waist. She smiled. He smiled in turn, passed on, hurrying.

No one at the beach. He lit a cigarette. Ask for Rodriquez? As if provoked by this thought, the quiet beach came to life. A group of beach-boys arrived. One approached Jim and he said, "Are you Rodriquez?"

"Si. You are ready?"

Jim nodded. Rodriquez barked an order. One of the boys plunged into the water and swam out to a boat at anchor. Rodriquez himself took off barefooted and returned with two fishing poles. Meanwhile the boat had been brought in close to the beach. Jim and Rodriquez climbed aboard. The motor started, the boat backed away, turned and headed for the open sea.

Under other circumstances, the trip alone would have been worthwhile, but Jim was preoccupied. Himself out here, Juan didn't have to climb the balcony. Knock on the door, walk in and strip for action, he thought.

A strike and his line went taut, the pole bent. Excited, the beach-boys rose to their feet. Far astern the placid surface of the sea broke as the fish that had struck jumped clear and flashed in the brilliant sunlight. Minutes later the fish was boated.

"A durado," one of the beach-boys pronounced it and with a blow from a club stilled it forever.

One more strike, and thereafter the sea gave up nothing. Only the scenery now, great cliffs with the sea battering them, then miles of beach and white surf wild and booming like cannon. Jim barely took notice, his mind on Kathy and Juan. He had been tricked and couldn't wait to get back.

At noon the boat nosed against the beach. Jim came ashore, eyes searching for Kathy. Rodriquez handed him his catch. Fifty yards away he saw Juan squatting on the back of his legs and Kathy lying on the sand. He dropped the fish, started forward, fists clenched. The sun was blinding, he began to run, caught himself.

I'm going mad, he thought, and he was gasping when he stood over Kathy. Juan was standing now. Kathy smiled at him. "Ah, your husband is back," said Juan.

"Didn't you catch anything?" Kathy asked.

"No luck."

"As I said, you must leave early for the big ones," Juan put in and, excusing himself, he walked off toward the hotel.

Kathy lay back on the sand again,

aware that Jim was staring at her. "Angry that you caught nothing?"

"Not about that."

"What then? My boy friend? There, you are jealous?" She laughed, pleased with herself.

"It's nothing to laugh about."

"Oh, come now, you're old enough to know better."

"I wonder," he said casually. And to himself: I wonder how long it's gone on?

4.

Evening on the balcony with Juan serving, and a new air about him that smacked of amused assurance which Jim found aggravating. He showed it, too, but to no avail. Juan's usual argument with the cook ensued. But back he came to the table in the same high mood — and with a new suggestion — a trip into the jungle. "Not quite for a lady," he added. "But I am sure you would enjoy it," he said to Jim.

It was obvious enough now that they wanted him out of the way, Jim realized, but he wondered if they took him for a fool. This time there would be no trip. But suddenly he changed his mind. It was insane, yet he made the decision quickly, saying, "I suppose it would be interesting."

"Something to remember after you leave," said Juan. "You won't regret it."

Jim looked at Kathy. "Oh, go along," she urged. "I wouldn't have you miss it for the world."

"But what will you do?"

"Occupy myself." This as she looked directly at him, as if deliberately flaunting him.

"Your wife is very obliging. An admirable quality," Juan smiled. Jim was afraid to look up, wanting to bash the fellow.

"It's an all-day trip," said Juan. "A man named Varga will pick you up at nine."

"Good. Bring me a Bohemia," said Jim, this to get rid of Juan. Then he looked at Kathy. She was lighting a cigarette, poised and cool-looking while he soaked in his own sweat.

What am I doing? he thought. Giving her to him. Trying to torture myself? The trip was a foolish idea, and yet behind the madness — method.

"Anything wrong?" Kathy asked.

"Just thinking."

"You're not going to change your mind about the jungle trip?"

"Does it matter if I do?"

"Of course. Don't let me spoil your fun. I'll be perfectly content here — and no one will steal me."

He felt she was laughing at him and almost exploded. Tomorrow will tell, he thought. Things are beginning to square. That made him smile, and Kathy asked why.

"It won't be long now."

"Meaning?"

"All sorts of things, mostly that we'll be flying home."

"I hate the thought of it. Aren't you going to miss all this?"

"A bit. What particularly will you miss?" he asked, feeling almost malicious now.

"Oh, everything. When are we coming back?"

"That all depends."

"On what?"

"Several things, my dear," and he smiled, seeing her frown.

They finished dining and went to the balcony below. Then Kathy joined the card players. Jim didn't mind, for he wanted to think and the coolest place was the balcony.

5.

Later, he sought the lobby but didn't see Kathy. He went to their room and knocked. No answer. For a moment anger assailed him, then he managed to grin, knowing she was with Juan. Stupid little Kathy, he thought. Quickly he turned round, passed through the lobby and down the front steps. The road curved and darkened under the palms; up ahead he thought he saw something white disappear in the shadows. Then Kathy emerged from the darkeness.

"Hello, what are you doing out here?"

Kathy advanced, then stood face to face with him. "Taking a breath of air. It was stifling inside." Perfectly poised, she raised a cigarette to her lips for him to light it.

"Dangerous walking this road at night," he said calmly as he struck a match. Her face was caught in the light, innocent. She smiled.

"Worried about me?"

"A bit." He dropped the match and added, "Terrible job you did on your mouth. Your lipstick is smeared. Here." He gave her his handkerchief and turned round. Up ahead, he again thought he saw a white shadow turn the curve in the road and he quickened his steps. A tall man in white entered the hotel.

"You're walking so fast," Kathy complained.

"Sorry."

He slowed his steps till they reached the lobby where Kathy joined the card players. Then he went to a rear balcony and found a tall man in white leaning against the railing, another waiter.

"Ah, Alfredo."

"Good evening, Mr. Withers!"

"It is very hot."

"Yes, very hot."

"Hotter when one walks fast."

Alfredo lifted his head and dropped his cigarette.

"You warned them, didn't you?" Jim said, and his hand went to his pocket. Alfredo stiffened, then saw the crisp bill in the hand extended toward him.

"I was asked to," he said, accepting the money and shrugging his shoulders.

"Who asked you?"

Alfredo hesitated. "The lady."

"I see. And suppose I asked you to do something?"

"I should have to consider."

Alfredo's meaning was clear, and Jim was already prepared with a

sheaf of pesos. Handing them over, he named a cafe in the city and said, "I'll be there all day tomorrow. If Juan should happen to go to my room, telephone me immediately. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Alfredo answered with a smile, and Jim turned and walked away, everything clear in his mind, too. Kathy and Juan expected him to go on the jungle trip. Which gave them all day to themselves, the leisure of time and freedom. Jim grinned unpleasantly. If Alfredo called, he could make it back to the hotel in ten minutes with a fast taxi.

Kathy was still in the lobby. With a glance toward her, he went to their room and turned in. It was stifling and close, yet he managed to fall asleep.

6.

Morning and he left the room, Kathy asleep yet. Foregoing breakfast, he sought out the guide, said he had changed his mind about the trip, tipped him well and took a taxi into the city.

There he bought a three-week-old New York paper and found an outdoor table at the cafe. Morning passed, the heat blazed. Noon and he retreated to the cooler interior of the cafe. With the siesta, the streets emptied and came to life afterward. Jim sat outside again, nerves ragged, patience worn. He had changed from coca cola to brandy and soda. Time oozed, the phone call from Alfredo never came.

At five, he gave up waiting, hailed a taxi, drove back to the hotel and sought out Alfredo who met him with a smile that made him want to smash his face in.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Withers, but there was no need to phone."

An obvious lie, but it was too late to do anything about it. "How much did you ask of the lady for not phoning me?" said Jim.

"Your wife? But she knew nothing. I went to Juan and he offered more than you." Alfredo smiled and shrugged. "Of course you want your money back."

"Keep it," Jim snarled, walking away.

The shower was running when he entered the room. He slammed the door shut and Kathy called out: "How was the trip, darling?"

"Wonderful. I didn't go."

"You didn't?" The pattering and splashing ceased in the bathroom. Towel around her, Kathy came out to find Jim standing at the door to the balcony, his face flushed and sweated, his eyes like glass.

"I don't understand," she said.

"There's nothing to understand. I didn't go because I met a party from New York. We went to a cafe and talked."

"And drank."

"So what? As long as you enjoyed yourself."

"I didn't exactly pine away."

Still acting, flippant now. He wanted to knock her little head off.

Why in hell did I marry her? he asked himself. But he knew why and turned away, going to the bathroom to shower himself. "I'll meet you on the upper balcony," he said.

Kathy was waiting for him and, as usual, Juan was at the table. He bowed, smiled at Jim, drew out his chair, and suddenly the cook began screaming at him from the kitchen. She was brandishing an ugly machete. Juan turned pale and didn't move till she turned away. Then he scampered into the kitchen.

"My God, did you see that?" said Kathy.

"Perhaps he'll tend to his business now," Jim answered calmly.

But he was wrong about that. At least, Juan found time to return to their table to drop a word when he served them coffee.

"And how was the jungle trip?" he asked with a gloating smile.

"You should know," Jim answered. Then, to deflect comment concerning this curious remark, he quickly turned to Kathy and said, "You know, we're leaving tomorrow. Do you think a hundred and fifty pesos too little to tip the cook?"

"Are you going out of your mind, Jim?"

"In deepest appreciation for services rendered, that's the way I feel about it."

"Oh, do what you wish."

Smiling, Jim counted out the money while Juan watched, obviously shocked. "And this is for you," said Jim, adding a mere ten-peso note as a tip for Juan who could not protest. He looked sick but managed a smile and retreated to the kitchen from which he returned some moments later to extend the cook's appreciation.

7

Later, on the lower balcony after Kathy had gone to join the card players, Jim sat with another guest. Conversation led to the cook and her tirade against Juan.

"Nothing new about that," said the other guest. "Last year she got to him with that machete and put him on his back for a month."

"Really?"

"A nasty old woman, but she can really cook."

"The best," said Jim, looking at his watch. He stood up, excused himself and went to the upper balcony. Quiet there, the diners and waiters gone, a light in the kitchen, the Indian woman cleaning up. As Jim stepped into the kitchen, she turned.

"Just wanted to make sure you received the tip I sent you," said Jim. "You did get it?"

The cook nodded, smiled.

"All of it? A hundred and fifty pesos?"

"It was but ten, Señor."

"That was for Juan. He must have made a mistake," said Jim and, with that, he turned round and left the kitchen.

Some minutes later, while standing at the front of the lobby, Juan

passed him without notice and started down the dark road under the motionless palms. Almost within seconds the Indian woman followed him.

Next morning neither the cook nor Juan appeared at the breakfast hour. Then news came of the murder. Juan had been found just below the hotel in the bushes, hacked to death. The Indian woman could not be located.

The guest of last year, whom Jim had spoken to the night before, was heard to say the obvious: "I wouldn't be surprised if it was the cook. They scrapped last night, and she slammed him with that machete once before, you know. Too bad, because she could wrestle up a meal."

Kathy had nothing to say. Not until she and Jim were aboard the plane and flying north toward Mexico City. Then she turned to Jim and said, "Wasn't it awful?"

Not looking at her, he lit a cigarette. "You mean about Juan? He had that coming, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"Jealousy, of course. The cook was soft on him, but yesterday she found he'd been going around with another woman. One of the hotel guests. Lucky the cook didn't go to work on her."

Kathy had turned dead white. "How do you know all this?" she finally asked.

"Alfredo told me," he replied, continuing the lie. Then he waited, for she had to ask, her woman's curiosity greater than her fear.

"Did he say who the woman was?"

Her words were weighted, barely audible. They made Jim smile, and at last he turned and looked at her. "Alfredo didn't have to," he said slowly, watching her turn pale again. Then she raised her hand in a peculiar constricted gesture, as if to ward off a blow, and he laughed.

"You see, I knew all the while," he went on. "And next time, if there is a next time, you'll know what to expect."



CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Vanishing Room

Many a novelist or movie script writer has used the old "disappearing" hotel room which is successfully concealed by the management after a scandal. Recently the plot came to real life in London's famed hostelry, the Ritz. After a murder and suicide in Room 223, the management sealed up the room, destroyed the bed and took the numbers off the door and off the hotel's register.

The Well-Known Miss X

The most amazing series of mistaken identifications in U. S. history followed the discovery of a body in Kansas City, Kansas, on Oct. 6, 1934. The victim, a girl of about 22, was found shot to death on a road outside of town. In addition to red hair, freckles and blue eyes, she had a peculiar scar on each ankle. Close to 150 people "identified" her as wife, daughter, sister or friend, and from two to 18 persons swore to *each* identification. In all there were 26 different identities claimed for the corpse. Yet after 7 months all 26 girls were found to be living, and Miss X was buried in an unmarked grave.

Call of the Wild

A Middletown, Conn., man, brought into the station after a wild plunge into the Connecticut River, had a novel excuse to offer the police: "Mermaids were calling me. Gosh, they were beautiful!"

Puppy Love

In San Diego, Calif., Mabel Whitsitt's brand-new hat shop was awaiting its first shopper when in walked a big Dalmatian dog who ran out bearing in his mouth a stuffed poodle from the window. Saleswomen chased him for a block, but stopped when the Dalmatian set the poodle down beside a tree, licked it gently and then stood guard.

Sex Repeal

Federal Court in San Francisco was temporarily held up recently during a damage suit brought by an injured longshoreman. In the complaint the ship was listed as the SS Sally Rand. Correct nomenclature — SS Talleyrand.

Auspicious Assault

Detroit police report a stabbing case in which the assailant, Samuel Wilson, actually did his victim, Felix Hammett, a favor — and paid the bill.

Hammett, slashed in the stomach, was rushed to Detroit's Receiving Hospital, where doctors found the stab revealed a badly infected ap-

pendix. Hastily they completed the operation and Hammett recovered. Wilson took the 60 day sentence calmly but was highly indignant when presented with the medical bill of $373.

Circumstantial Evidence

Judge J. Louis Missall of North Sacramento, Calif., sentencing Daniel Hardin Bean to 6 months for drunken driving, inquired if he had any witnesses to help him.

"No, sir," Bean said sadly. "They were all drunker than I was."

Colonial Collision

George Washington and Benjamin Franklin have met again — but not in the beyond. It happened in Richmond, Va. — when individuals bearing those names ran their trucks into each other in the midst of downtown traffic.

Beau Brummel

A burglar in Tokyo, Japan, broke into the apartment of a 35-year-old geisha girl and robbed her of $18. Then he demanded her electric iron, carefully pressed his suit, and walked out.

Egg Enigma

In a house in Baltimore, Md., officers of the numbers racket squad found a setting hen. Under the hen were some eggs ensconced on a nest. Under the nest, within a cardboard box, was a lottery box. They arrested Robert S. Wallace, Jr., who was held on $2,500 bail for grand jury action.

Bandit Bugaboos

The American Bankers Assn. reports that a close runner-up for electronic hold-up alarms is "nature's most spontaneous self-starting alarm — the scream of a woman teller." In addition to screaming, ladies in cages foil bandits by fainting, or simply dropping down behind the counter. American banks now employ, in lesser positions, 270,000 females in proportion to 140,000 males.

In Canada, female employes are also held in justified esteem. Recently a Montreal cashier, Evi Williams, had presented to her by two men, a note in French demanding $2,000. Since she can't read French, she sent them to another cashier, Mrs. Antonine Blanchette. The latter glanced at the note, then back at the men contemptuously.

"Banks don't operate that way. Beat it!" she told them.

And they did.

Professional Pride

In Reigate, England, the weather seems to be breeding neuroses. And when a long cold rain recently began spotting the shop windows of the business district, 46-year-old George Orr, a window cleaner by trade, saw red. As court witnesses informed the judge, he snatched up a beer bottle, tore down the street, smashing every bit of plate glass along his

route. When the police stopped him he had pounded to splinters windows costing 334 pounds 18 shillings ($937.72). The judge gave George 6 months to calm down.

Style Makes the Man

The federal court in Oklahoma City arraigned on a bad check charge Bill Bloom, 28, solely because of an observant patrolman in Clinton who stopped Bloom's Cadillac.

Asked to explain his suspicions, the officer replied, "I just didn't think he was driving like a Cadillac owner."

Cop Capers

In Milwaukee, Wis., sheriff's deputies are now wearing blue shirts and black ties in municipal and district courts. Too many judges, they explained, had been mistaking them for criminals lately.

Baton Rouge has suspended six members of the force for using confiscated juvenile BB guns in target practise, thus damaging walls in the police station.

Meaty Bosom

A housewife in Oklahoma City frustrated by the high cost of protein, was arrested after slipping into the front of her dress three veal cutlets, three steaks, two pounds of bacon and two slices of lunch meat.

Oriental Calm

A Chinese laundryman named Tom Dry in Baltimore, Md., was held up recently. Flourishing a gun the bandit demanded, "Hurry it up, Bub. Give me the money."

"No money," Dry stated placidly.

"Then give me that cigar box!" pointing to one on the counter.

"No box," Dry said, and walked into the back room.

The gunman walked out, without the cash.

In San Francisco another laundryman, Song Lee, 37, thwarted not one but two would-be robbers and summoned police. On his description of the pair, Henry Leong, 19, was soon picked up running through a vacant lot, dazedly waving a 32 pistol. Branded fierily across his brow was the outline of Song Lee's hot flatiron.

Weighty Reason

When Jesse Hale of Pittsburgh, Pa., was arraigned for sending in a false fire alarm, he hopefully offered the judge an explanation. His wife, weighing 270 pounds, had fallen down and he couldn't lift her. The judge put him on probation for two years.

Tasty Loot

Carl Forslund, furniture dealer, told Grand Rapids police he was sorry for the man who stole a Christmas wreath of fruit from outside his store. The grateful thief left a note reading: "Thank you for the oranges and apples. A starving man." The fruit had been heavily shellacked for display purposes only.

Efficiency Plus

A constable of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, honeymooning in Chicago, learned that he has nothing on the Windy City's police in the speed line. Arvid Landstrom of Toronto, Ont., reported a loss of $450 worth of clothing from his car, only to find that an hour before, police had arrested the thief and recovered the clothing.

Angels, Maybe!

Finding two men on a packing office roof, one Sunday night, loaded with hacksaws, wrenches and other tools, Chicago police investigated. But, said the men, burglary was the last thing they had in mind. They were out looking for girls.

Treed

"Stolen car up in a tree," the patrolman called in over his cruiser's radio.

After several ribald suggestions, headquarters sent out detectives to find a stolen car actually dangling by chains from a tree outside an automobile sales company in New Orleans, La.

Salesman Ace Russell told the police he had found the abandoned car there and hoisted it up by means of an engine and chains. "It was taking up too much valuable space," he explained.

Short Wave Cheats

Police in Nuremberg, Germany, arrested three super-gamblers who worked with the aid of midget radios hidden in their fashionable evening clothes. They had been winning from all the best gambling clubs of West Germany until an observant croupier became suspicious.

The three had their racket perfected to an art. They would enter separately as strangers, dressed to the nines. One, languidly kibitizing, would move about the table where the others operated, with a battery-operated radio transmitter well hidden in his clothing. His right hand would tap out in code on a telegraph key hidden in the other pocket all the information needed by his partners, who had tiny radio receiving sets concealed in their own clothes.

The signals would be received by them as impulses against their bodies, and guided by the information, they were pulling in heavy winnings.



Morning Movie



BY MURIEL BERNS

They were only young boys, she thought. They couldn't really do any harm . . .

When Carol found there would be a twenty-minute wait before the next feature, she went downstairs to the lounge for a cigarette. No hurry. It was only a quarter past ten, and she had the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon to herself before she had to be at work at the telephone company.

The lounge was empty. She sank down in a big leather chair behind a bank of decorative ferns to straighten the seams of her stockings, pleasantly aware of the cool, almost caressing firmness of the leather through her thin summer dress.

It was good to get away from

people and voices for a while, and when half a dozen teen-age boys came in, she knew a moment's irritation. She flipped her dress back down over her knees, but the boys had not seen her. They glanced around, as if to assure themselves they were alone, and then sat down in a group of chairs on the other side of the ferns. They all wore leather jackets with chrome stars on the shoulders, and all except one of the boys were, Carol guessed, about sixteen. The other boy was no more than fourteen. There was an adolescent fleshiness to his face, and his large dark eyes had a sheen close to tears.

Carol had taken cigarettes and lighter from her purse, but now she hesitated. There was a charged silence on the other side of the ferns, a kind of ominous pause. She studied the boys' faces. There were no smiles there, none of the expressions she might expect in a group that age. Almost unconsciously, she dropped the cigarettes and lighter back in her purse, and then sat quite still.

One of the boys, a little larger than the others and the only blond-haired one of the six, leaned forward and stared narrowly at the boy with the moist dark eyes.

"We're waiting, Teddy," he said softly. "You said you wanted a chance. All right. This is it."

"I didn't split to the law. Jesus, Rich, you know me better than that."

"Crap," one of the other boys said.

"Keep your lip out of this," the blond boy said. "I'll do the talking."

"Listen, Rich," Teddy said. "It was just like I told you. I didn't show because the old man found out I was up to something. He busted a strap on my can and locked me in my room. How you going to beat that? How could I meet you guys when the old —"

"You're off base again, Teddy," Rich said. "Way off. We don't give a good goddam why you didn't show. All we want to know is how come the *law* showed. That's all, Teddy. You try telling us that, for a change."

Teddy moistened his lips, his eyes a little wider now, a little more moist. "Jesus, guys, I —"

"Hurry it up," Rich said. "We ain't got all day. Somebody's liable to fall in here any minute."

"I don't *know* why they showed." Teddy said. "All I know is the old man found that curtain rod I used to make a zip-gun with, and he figured how I was —"

"Look," Rich said. "We spend two days working out a heist. We figure everything, every damn angle. We get so we know more about the way old lady Wimbert runs a candy store than she knows herself. Okay. Then, a couple of hours before we're supposed to pull it, we find out we got to move the time up a couple of hours. So what happens? You say

you got to go home a minute, but you'll be right back. You —"

"Listen, Rich! You know I —"

"Just shut up a minute, for Christ's sake. All right, so you go home. But you don't come back. We figure to hell with you, and we fall over to the candy store. And what happens?" He paused, smiling a little. "Tell us what happens, Teddy."

Behind the bank of ferns, Carol felt a sudden dull pain in her lungs, and realized she had been holding her breath. The big leather chair, so pleasant a moment ago, now seemed too chill. She glanced toward the door to the ladies' room, and then at the stairway leading up to the lobby. But even as fear became her only emotion, she knew she could not leave the chair. She sensed the danger of it. These boys were like no others she had ever known. They were completely outside her experience, and it was as if a door had been opened to a world she had never really believed existed.

The dark-eyed boy's face was sheened with sweat. "I tell you I didn't split!" he said.

"How come the law was waiting for us in back of the candy store, Teddy?"

"I don't know!"

"Sure you do. You know because you told them."

"Rich —"

"Shut up," Rich said. He glanced around the circle of faces and then spoke in an even softer voice. "So our club's busted up, and we're all on probation. The juve squad's nosing around, and the first thing you know they're going to smell out some of the other heists. The first time any of us spits in the subway, he's asking for a fast trip to the coop." He paused. "You're a squealing, no-good son of a bitch, Teddy."

One of the other boys gestured impatiently. "To hell with him, Rich. We got to get out of here before somebody busts the setup."

"Rich, listen to me!" Teddy said. "You said you'd give me a chance. You said —"

"Maybe I was lying," Rich said. "You ever think of that?" He shook his head slowly. "No. Any bastard dumb enough to split to the law is too dumb to think of anything." He glanced about him at the others. "That's it, guys. Let's go."

The boys, with the exception of Teddy, rose quickly. Teddy stared up at them, dark eyes enormous against the sudden pallor of his face. His lips moved, but there was no sound.

As the group moved toward the stairway, the younger boy's chair was obscured for a moment. Several hands reached out as if emphasizing contempt, and then the group was on its way out.

Carol waited a long moment before she started for the stairway. As she passed Teddy's chair, she could not resist a final look at him.

He sat with his head pressed against the top of the chair, as if he had tried to make his small body conform to the convex surface of the back. There was something strange about his eyes, she noticed, and then she saw the small yellow handle of the icepick protruding from his chest.

And in the same instant she saw the subtle, almost imperceptible change that came into his eyes, and she knew that he was dead.

She stared at him, feeling her lips draw back from her teeth and the muscles cording in her throat, and then she was running up the stairs to the lobby.

She saw an usher, and started toward him, and then felt she would fall before she could reach him. She sat down suddenly on a marble bench and covered her face with her hands. She had to tell someone what she had seen, she knew — and yet she could not. For a few moments a door had been opened on an incredible, terrifying world, but now that door had closed, and no fear she had ever known was like the fear she felt at the thought of opening it again.

Laughter reached her through the door to the nearest aisle, and she glanced toward it. There were people in there, hundreds of them. It would be so easy to slip in among them, into the darkness . . . Oh, Lord, why had it had to happen while *she* was there? She had never done anything wrong. Why should she have to be the one? She couldn't live through another moment of the world she had just seen, she knew. She couldn't live through being questioned by the police about it, describing the boys who had executed Teddy, coming face to face with them in court.

A minute dragged by, and then another, and then Carol got slowly to her feet and moved to the aisle and down its dark length looking for a seat.



What's Your Verdict?

No. 7 — The Loving Wife

BY SAM ROSS

WALTER PREDON didn't like nicknames. He thought his own name was sort of rich and distinguished, and he'd always wanted to be rich. Even though his mother had been Molly Predon, the well-known washerwoman, and though his father had been Joe Predon the out-of-work carpenter, Walter liked to think of himself as heir to a great fortune and scion of a wealthy family.

Walter liked other people to think of him that way, too — and that's what started all the trouble. Because Walter met a girl.

Her name was Sally Dempster, and she was beautiful. Walter fell for her, and in order to impress her he spun several tales of his millionaire father, his bejewelled mother and the whole mansionful of servants which they commanded. Sally wasn't a very suspicious girl, and Walter had had lots of practice with his lies. In time, though, Sally would have realized that the Predons were far from affluent, if it hadn't been for Walter's stroke of luck.

It seemed that Molly Predon, Walter's mother, had had a sister who'd managed to marry into some money. When she died, Walter was named the heir to some twenty-five thousand dollars in cash.

With that as equipment, Walter proceeded to dazzle young Sally Dempster quite thoroughly. He took her to the most expensive spots in town, drove her around in his shining new car, and on one occasion even lit her cigarette with a brand-new, flaming ten dollar bill. Walter was in his element, and before either of the young people knew what had happened, they'd become engaged to be married.

Still thinking that Walter was the rich scion of the Predon millions, Sally married him. But after the wedding she started to ask embarrassing questions, pinning Walter down on when she was going to meet his folks, and whether Mr. and Mrs. Walter Predon were going to live in the Predon family mansion. Walter got more and more uncomfortable and, one evening, while they were having dinner in the town's best and most expensive hotel, he blurted out the truth. He told Sally that he wasn't really rich,

that his mother and father were dead, that the $25,000 legacy was all he had to his name, and that if she really loved him she wouldn't care.

She did care, though, and she made quite a scene in the restaurant that night. When she calmed down the next morning, however, she realized that she might as well stick to Walter — so long as he had any of that legacy left. When it was gone, she'd have time enough to think about annulling the marriage. After all, she'd been lured into it by false promises.

It took about four more months for the money to run out. The day it did, Sally confronted her husband in their apartment.

"I'm going to have our marriage annulled," she said.

Walter was merely confused, at first. "Annulled? You mean you're going to divorce me. But why . . ."

"No, I can't divorce you," Sally said. "I haven't any legal grounds, not in this state. But I married you on the basis of false claims, and that's enough to annul the marriage."

Walter tried to turn the discussion around to whether or not they loved each other, but Sally took care of that in short order.

"I don't love you and I never did. I like money, and you haven't got any now."

Sally left the apartment. For a little while Walter just stood there. Then he realized that he wanted Sally back. At any rate, he didn't want her to succeed with her plan.

He went to the telephone and called a lawyer.

When the case came to court, Sally's plea was simple.

"I married my husband when I thought he was a rich man, the son of a rich family. I know now that he isn't. I was defrauded and I insist that our marriage be annulled."

Walter came up with a strong objection, though:

"Why didn't she drag the thing into court when she first found out about the lies I was telling? She wanted to get all the money out of me she could. Is that fair? You can't give her what she wants now."

Who was right? What's *your* verdict?

ANSWER:

Walter was right. In a case of fraud before marriage, the defrauded person has a right to ask that the marriage be annulled. But if the one who's been fooled waits around for a while before asking for an annulment, it will no longer be granted.





Epitaph

Maybe, if I'd told Ray, things would be different now. But I never told Ray anything . . . so there's only one thing I can do . . .

BY ERSKINE CALDWELL

THERE'S nothing else I can do. I can't go on living any longer. Even one more day of this torment would be more than I could endure.

I've been married for two years now, and no other man in the whole world could possibly have been as dear to me as my husband, Ray, has been every day of our life together I can't imagine how he could have been more devoted to me, and I'm glad he's the only man I've ever been truly in love with. I could never, never, never love anybody else as I love Ray. But for two years now I've been living in constant

torment, and I just can't stand it another day.

What has happened to me is my own fault. Ray had nothing to do with it. He doesn't even know about it. I'm the one to blame.

During all this time, night and day, I've tried to think of every possible way of persuading Walter Greenway to let me go so I can stop deceiving Ray. I've been on my knees I don't know how many times and begged him to let me go, but Walter won't listen to me. Every time I try to talk to him about it he threatens to tell my husband. Ray has always said he'll leave me if I ever deceive him and he finds out that I've been unfaithful, and I know he means it. I love him so much I'd do anything in the world to keep him from leaving me. I don't want to deceive Ray — it's the last thing on this earth I want to do. I want to be faithful to him because he's Ray, and my husband. I hate myself every minute of the day for what I've done.

Four years ago, when I was twenty-three, I went to work as bookkeeper in Walter's office. I had just finished my commercial courses at business college then. That was two years before I married Ray Hammond. Walter was a commission agent for tung oil shippers and he had a small brokerage office on the second floor of a red brick building near the waterfront between the river and Jackson Square. Walter, who had lived in New Orleans all his life, was thirty-four then, and he had taken over the management of the commission business when his father died. There were many commission agents and forwarding companies in that section of the city, it being within a few blocks of the Mississippi River wharves and docks.

Walter was a bachelor and he lived in an apartment on the third floor of the same building. It was a large, spacious apartment with a wonderful view of the river and it had a wide, iron lacework veranda overlooking the Square. Walter was a well-dressed, handsome man with a tall, erect figure. He had very dark hair — much darker than mine — and twinkling clear eyes. It always seemed to me that it would have been easy for any girl to fall in love with him, and probably many did. I was on the verge myself of falling in love with him many times, and I've often wondered what would have happened to me if I had. I went up to Walter's apartment on the third floor after office hours several times a week, sometimes staying all night with him instead of going home to Gentilly where I lived with my mother and younger sister. Every time I stayed with Walter in those days I would have eagerly consented to marry him if he had asked me. He never asked me, but he did say many times that I was good-looking enough to satisfy any man and that he would rather have me than any girl he had ever known.

During that first year, and before I met Ray, Walter took me on week end trips to Biloxi and Gulfport and Pass Christian all summer long and we went sailboating on the Gulf and lay on the beach in the moonlight. I was happy then, because I realized how very lonely I had been before becoming intimate with Walter. He was the first man I had desire for and the first man I was willing to make love with, and maybe for that reason none of the things we did seemed to me to be improper. I thought surely he was going to ask me sooner or later to marry him, and I always hoped he would each time we were together. However, he never once proposed marriage.

"Walter," I asked him one night on the beach at Biloxi, "are all your brothers and sisters married?"

"All three married and settled down early in life, honey," he said, laughing about it. "But I was always different. I guess it's just the way I am. I'm still on the outside looking in."

"Is that the way you want it to be, Walter?" I asked.

"It sure is, honey," he said with unmistakable meaning in his voice. "I always make it a practice to have things the way I want them."

It was about a year after that when I met Ray Hammond, and he asked me to marry him a week after we met. Ray was kind and generous and considerate, and I was certain from the very beginning that I would never regret it if I married him. He was not handsome like Walter, and he couldn't afford to wear expensive clothes, but he appealed to me more than anyone else I had ever known. Ray worked for an insurance company, and he said that in a few years he would be able to support both of us, and probably two or three more in time. I knew he wanted children, and I did, too. He was willing for me to keep on working until the time came when I was to have our first child. Ray was twenty-eight then, and he looked forward to being assistant manager of the insurance office in two more years.

"We'll be on our feet in a year or two," he said confidently, "and you won't have to work another day after that. That's something I can promise. You just wait and see."

"I don't mind working, Ray," I told him. "But I do want to make a home for us, and I'll stop the day you want me to."

"I'm going to see to it that we don't have to wait too long for that time to come," he said. "That's my big ambition in life right now."

When I told Walter the next day what I was planning to do, he told me to go ahead and marry Ray if I wanted to, but that he was not going to give me up and that he expected me to keep on coming to his apartment after business hours as I had for the past two years. I couldn't believe he really meant what he said, and, since I was so deeply in love with Ray, we went

ahead and married. We left right away for a week's honeymoon in Florida. I was so happy with Ray that I forgot all about Walter and what he had said he expected of me.

The first day I went back to work, after that wonderful week in Florida with Ray, Walter told me to meet him in his apartment that afternoon instead of going home at five-thirty. I cried and tried my best to make him understand that I was in love with Ray and did not want to be unfaithful. I was so upset I didn't know what to do. At first, Walter laughed at me and joked about my concern. After that, when I kept on begging him to let me go, he became very angry and said he would tell Ray we had been lovers for two years if I did not do as he wanted me to do. Maybe I should've told him to go ahead and tell Ray anything he wanted to, and then maybe everything would have been different after that. Probably that would have been the wisest thing to do. Or maybe I should have told Ray that I had been intimate with Walter. I think Ray would have forgiven me at that time, because we were so much in love and it seemed like there would never be an end to our honeymoon. In either case, I could have given up my job in Walter's office and found work somewhere else. But I was afraid of Walter Greenway. I was afraid of what might happen if I refused to go to his apartment with him, and so at five-thirty I went up to the third floor instead of going home to Ray.

Walter made gin fizzes and we sat there looking at each other for a long time. It was summer then, and warm, and occasionally a languid breeze from the Gulf passed through the open windows. I was thinking of Ray and the little house we'd rented. I could see him waiting at home for me and I knew how hurt he would be if he knew where I was and the reason for my being there. I couldn't hold back the tears after that.

"There's no use taking on like that, honey," Walter said after a while. He sat down beside me and put his arms around me and kissed me. I wanted to resist him and drive him away from me, but I knew how useless it would be to try. He was accustomed to having his way with me at will, and I could tell how determined he was then to continue making love to me. By that time I was so weak and limp with fear and unhappiness that I was completely helpless. When I opened my eyes at last, it was growing dark everywhere, and after that I lay there sobbing for a long time. Later, I heard Walter say, "You're going to feel a lot better about this now, honey. You're not the kind of girl who'd want to put an end to all we have. We've known each other too long for that to happen now. This can go on forever, and you know it, don't you?"

"I don't know — I don't know!" I cried. "All I know is that I want to go — please let me go, Walter!"

"You're excited now, honey. Just be calm, and you'll feel a lot better."

"I'm going to tell Ray — I'm going to tell him everything as soon as I get home!"

"If you do, it'll be the last time he'll be around to listen to you. You'd better think about that."

I could feel myself trembling all over.

"Oh, dear God!" I cried weakly.

Walter left me and went to the other side of the room.

"I'm going to make some more gin fizzes," I heard him say. "That'll help."

When I got home at ten o'clock that night, I wanted to tell Ray everything that had happened and beg him to forgive me and help me. He saw at once how upset I was, and he tried to get me to tell him what the reason was for my being like that. He took me into his arms and held me tightly, but even when I clung to him I still couldn't bring myself to tell him. Every time I remembered the threat that Walter had made I was afraid something terrible might happen to Ray. I knew Walter once had killed a man in an argument about a woman, and I was afraid something might happen to Ray now.

That's why I didn't tell Ray that time, or the next time I was with Walter. And so for two years I've continued going to Walter's apartment every time he's told me he wanted me to go. That has happened at least once a week, sometimes two or three times a week. Ray believes I work late at the office those nights, and I don't think he has ever suspected the reason why I come home late so often.

Ray has never stopped talking about our having a child since we were married two years ago, and I've waited all this time, hoping every day that Walter would let me go. Ray has been promoted to assistant manager of his office now, and he's earning three times the salary he was getting when we were married. Several times lately he's said he thinks it's time for me to stop working. Night after night, lying awake in the darkness beside Ray, I've hoped and prayed that Walter would find somebody else he wants more than me. But it's been the same week after week, and he still says I'm the most desirable woman he knows, and now I'm pregnant and I'm not sure whose child I'm carrying. I love Ray too much to let him think he was the father of a child when I could never be certain if he or Walter is the father. As long as I lived, no matter how much I loved the child I gave birth to, I'd be miserable and unhappy for Ray's sake.

It's too late now to beg Walter again to let me leave my job and stop seeing him, because even if he did let me go, I would still never know whether he or Ray was the father of the child.

I can't tell Ray now, and ask him to forgive me, because even if he did forgive me, we would still be living

in that awful uncertainty. I wish now I had told Ray about Walter two years ago. I should have told him everything that day I went back to work after our honeymoon — I should've told him even before that. That's what I ought to have done. But it's too late now — oh, so late.

I'm suffering for what I've done, and now that the baby is on the way, I can't endure this torture another day.

There's only one thing left for me to do. I just can't live any longer. I've got to go ahead and do what I've decided. I couldn't endure waking up in the morning one more time and having this terrible feeling for even one more day. It'll be better for everybody, too. It'll be better for Ray.

There may be other ways, but I can't think of any now. I've thought and thought until my mind refuses to be a mind any longer. I've got to go ahead and do what I've decided to do.

. . . My name was Amelie.



Win $50.00!

Here's your chance to be a detective! All the clues you need to follow Lt. Tom Reardon's reasoning and come up with a killer are in the story. In 200 words or less, finish the story. Find the killer and the clues which point to him in the story. The best ending to this story, in the opinion of the editors of MANHUNT, which reaches us before January 31, 1955, will win for its author a $50 prize. The name of the winner and his entry will be published in our July 1955 issue. Duplicate awards will be made in case of ties. It is not necessary to purchase this magazine in order to enter the contest.

YOU, detective

No. 2 — The Green Beard

BY WILSON HARMAN

Lieutenant Tom Reardon looked at the three people before him and shook his head before he asked: "What kind of a beard?"

Red-haired Nancy Browne looked at her tall, blond husband before replying: "A green one. He was a big man in a green beard. He came in and asked to see Mr. Howard, and after a few minutes he came out again. We didn't have any idea that he'd —" She stopped and bit her lip. Her husband said:

"All right, dear. It's all right." Then, to Reardon: "We all saw a green beard. Thought it was a joke. Someone playing a joke on Nancy, because it was her first day working in the office. Now, can't you leave us alone?"

"I've got a job to do," Reardon reminded him quietly. He turned to the third member of the party. "How about you, Mr. Fane? Did you see the man in the green beard?"

"Of course," Fane said. "He came down the hallway to Mr. Howard's office, and I heard Mr. Howard greet him. I remember thinking the green beard must be a joke. Mr. Howard was cheerful. Except to the office staff, of course."

"None of you liked your boss, did you?" Reardon asked. He took out a black pipe, filled and lit it, before there was an answer.

Jack Browne said: "What if we didn't? It's no secret. A man doesn't commit murder for that." His arm was around his wife's shoulders, tightly.

Reardon shook his head. "One of you," he said, "disliked Jason Howard violently. Hated him. That can lead to murder."

Fane straightened his tall, dark frame. "That's ridiculous." He closed his eyes. "How much longer are we going to be questioned here?"

"Until I get an answer," Reardon said. "Somebody from the Howard offices killed Jason Howard. A passerby in the hall saw the green-bearded man step outside from a private door, and then go back in through the reception room — where you were spending your first working day, Mrs. Browne. Somebody wanted the murder to look like an outside job."

Mrs. Browne looked helpless. Her husband spread his big hands out in front of him and stared at them. After a while he said: "Does it have to be one of us?"

"Only you and Mr. Fane here fit the description of the build."

"I'd have recognized Jack's voice," Nancy Browne said.

"And you might be trying to protect him," Reardon told her softly.

Fane cut in, explosively. "I've had enough," he said. "Keeping us here — not only Browne and me, but this poor girl. Why that black hair hasn't turned white, I'll never know. It's certainly not your fault."

"Mrs. Browne is here at her own request; she said she wanted to stay by her husband," Reardon reminded him.

"And none of you will have to stay here much longer. I've found my killer."





The Drifter

The truck was late, so Pete and Joe had nothing to do but sit around and wait. That was why the trouble started.

BY ROBERT S. SWENSON

JOE MORELLI and Pete Lane sat on the steps of the general store. It was hot, the way New England can get in late September. The men had taken off their jackets and piled them on the two battered suitcases that were set behind them on the porch of the store. They both wore white shirts, open at the collar, with the sleeves rolled up.

They were drifters, both about thirty-five, and, having worked the summer as dairy hands on one of the neighboring farms, they were on their way now to spend the winter in Florida. They had been prom-

ised a ride to New York in a truck, and their ride was over an hour late. It was a fact that irritated Pete Lane a great deal and Joe Morelli not at all.

Occasionally a car came drifting through the town on the narrow, twisting highway, and until a broad, low, mongrel beagle trotted around the corner of the building, it was the only movement in the town.

When the dog saw the two men he changed his course abruptly and came over to sniff the end of Pete Lane's shoe. Pete watched the dog for about three seconds and then he shot his foot out and kicked the dog in the face. The dog gave a sharp yelp and pulled back quickly. He stared at Pete in a much bewildered way, and then he trotted off, licking the end of his nose.

"What a dull, rotten, filthy town this is," Pete said. He took out a soiled handkerchief and mopped his face with it, and then he resettled himself against the square supporting post of the porch. He lit up a cigarette and blew out a thin cloud of smoke and, as he did, he looked up the highway, listening and watching for the long overdue transportation. At that moment a man came into sight around the bend of the road.

Pete began to smile. "Well, look who's coming," he said.

Joe Morelli squinted up the road at the approaching figure. "Who's that? That Manny?"

"Yeah. Little orphan Annie. For the first time since I've been here I'm glad to see him. Anything to break up this filthy monotony."

Manny had a slow, awkard manner about him. He walked like a little boy, dragging his feet and deliberately scuffing the ground to stir up an eddy of thin dust spirals. A tall, heavy man, with tremendous hips and thick legs, he was somewhere in his thirties. His head, chest and shoulders were smaller than the rest of him and it made him look out of proportion, as if he was made up of parts from two different men. He was considerably overweight.

He came up and stood in front of the two men with a faint, pleased smile on his face. Pete flicked his cigarette at him and it bounced off the side of his arm. "Hello, Annie," he said.

"I'm not Annie."

Pete screwed up his face and cocked his head toward Manny. "What? What did you say, Annie?"

"My name's Manny."

"Well now, ain't that funny. I thought your name was Annie. I thought you were a girl."

"I'm not a girl," Manny said. He was pouting.

"So you don't think you're a girl. Is that right, Annie? Well do you know what I think, Annie? I think the next chance you get you'd better take a good look at yourself. You got bigger brannigans than a lot of girls I know." He looked over at Joe Morelli and laughed.

Joe was looking at Manny's hands.

"Hey, what you got in your hands?" he asked.

Manny was holding his hands cupped together and, when Joe asked this, he brought his hands up close to his face. He opened them up a bit and peeked in. "Toad," he said. He held his hands softly against his cheek.

"A toad? No kidding?" Pete said. "Let me see."

Manny opened his hands and showed it to him. It was a fat, blinking creature covered with thick warts. Manny began caressing the back of the toad with his big clumsy forefinger, and he was smiling at the toad.

"Put it down so we can get a better look at it," Pete said.

He stopped patting the toad and he stared at Pete, vacant and uncomprehending.

"Come on, come on, put it on the step so we can get a look at it." It was a harsh command and Manny moved to obey. He put the toad carefully on the step in front of Pete.

Pete leaned over and looked down at the toad. "Now ain't that something," he said. "Ain't that really something. A toad. Can you beat that." He put his heavy shoe on top of the toad, and immediately Manny reached down to retrieve his animal. Pete pushed him away.

"Leave him alone. I ain't hurting him. I just don't want him to hop away. You don't want to lose him, do you?" He looked up slyly at Manny and then he winked at Joe. Slowly he began increasing the pressure of his foot, pushing the toad down. In a moment the toad was squashed flat on the wooden step.

"You dirty louse," Joe said. He had to push Manny away while he covered the toad with dirt. Great tears were rolling down Manny's bewildered face.

Joe gave Pete a look of disgust and then he grabbed Manny by his fat arms. "Manny, look. Forget about it. It's just a toad. You can get another one. It's . . ."

But he could see that it was useless to talk to him. He went back and sat down beside Pete again on the steps.

Manny squatted down on the ground. He was blinking away his tears, and he began poking his finger in the dust, trying to uncover the dead toad. They both watched him.

"Jesus Christ, you hate everything, don't you?" Joe said.

"Well, what makes you think you're so pure all of a sudden?"

"You didn't have to kill the thing."

"Oh, for Chrissake, Joe. Manny's just a half-wit. He's feeble minded. He don't know anything and he don't feel anything." He looked at Manny again. "Ain't that so, little orphan Annie? You haven't got any brains, have you?"

Manny stood up and pouted at Pete. "My name's Manny."

"No it ain't. It's Annie. Little orphan Annie. You're a girl."

His eyes were brimming with tears. "I ain't no girl," he protested.

"No Annie, you're wrong. You're a girl. You're a girl and you haven't got a brain in your head. Is that right, Annie?"

"I'm not Annie."

Pete pulled himself off the steps and walked over to the dim-witted giant. He stood directly in front of him and looked up into his face. He was about six inches shorter than Manny was.

"Annie, I just got an idea," Pete said. "A beautiful idea. They tell me you've never done a useful thing in your life. Well, I'm going to give you a chance to do the first useful thing you ever did." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a jackknife. He held the knife in front of Manny's face and pressed the button on the handle. A four-inch blade snapped out, brushing Manny's nose.

"How old are you, Annie? Twenty? Twenty-five?"

"My name ain't Annie."

"Annie, they tell me that for all your life somebody has had to take care of you. They tell me you're not good for anything. Somebody has to dress you, somebody has to feed you, somebody has to tell you what to do. You're just like a baby, only you're worse than a baby because a baby's got brains.

"You're no good for anybody, little orphan Annie. No good for yourself, no good for me, no good for Joe here, no good for anybody."

Joe came over and tried to push Pete away. "For Chrissake, leave him alone, will you, Pete? What did he ever do to you?"

He shrugged Joe off. "Annie, they tell me you'll do anything anybody tells you." He put the knife into Manny's hand, closed Manny's fingers around the handle, and brought his hand up so that the knife was a few inches from Manny's throat.

He stared into Manny's dull blue eyes. "Annie," he ordered. "Cut your throat."

"Pete, for Chrissake, what are you trying to do?"

"Well, Jesus, Joe. I'm only trying to give little orphan Annie here the chance to do the first useful thing he ever did. You're not trying to stop me, are you?"

They stared at each other for a moment and then Joe shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the porch.

Pete laughed and pushed the blade closer to Manny's throat. Then he stood with his hands on his hips, looking up into the frightened, stupid face. "Annie," he commanded. "Do as I say. Cut your throat. Go on! Cut it!"

Manny's lower lip was trembling and his mouth hung open as he stared down at Pete. He was beginning to drool out of the corner of his mouth, and the knife was shaking in his hand. Then he began to lower his hand slowly.

It made Pete laugh. "Now can you beat that," he said. "They told

me you'd do anything anybody ever told you." He laughed again. "And they told me you never did a useful thing in your life, and they were right. You never did and you never will. Little orphan Annie. Big, fat, stupid, little girl . . . "

For just the barest fraction of a second there was the glint of sunlight on the blade of the knife. With one short, quick motion, and with his tremendous strength, Manny drove the knife into Pete's belly.

It was an underhanded motion, and he ripped upward and sideways with the knife so that he made a long, curved cut. It made a hole in Pete's shirt only slightly larger than the width of the knifeblade. The hole in Pete's belly was nearly a foot long.

He did not speak again. He made only a strange gurgling sound deep in his throat. He covered the wound with both hands, and he stared down at the wound watching the blood flow like a river through his fingers.

He began sagging to the ground almost at once and his white shirt and pants were already red with blood. When he had sagged almost to the ground, he dropped suddenly into a sitting position, it was only a foot or so, but he dropped with enough force so that his intestines spilled out into his shirt, and he sat holding his insides and staring at his hands. He was like a man stealing sausage.

In a moment he fell forward and over to one side a little and he was dead.

The whole thing took not more than ten seconds.

Manny turned and began to walk away. The road was bare. For a second Joe watched Manny walking away.

Then he thought to himself, "Now where in hell is that truck?"



Portrait of a Killer

No. 18 — Evan Thomas

BY DAN SONTUP

It began with a man being unhappy. That, in itself, wasn't at all unusual, but when the unhappy man began to work off his frustrations with a high-powered rifle, it soon led to one of the most bizarre cases in police records. A motion picture was made based on the crimes committed by this man, stories began to appear in the magazines, and the whole thing sounded so much like something straight out of detective fiction, that there are still people today who are not aware that "The Sniper" was a real man — a genuine killer.

His name was Evan Thomas. He didn't get along with his wife, and he felt that his lot in life was a pretty sorry one. It didn't even help much when his wife would take the two children and go off to visit relatives. Evan was free then to prowl the streets at night, which he did, but nothing came of it. Evan was too shy and too inexperienced to make a play for other women, and his going out at night alone and returning alone after hours of fruitless wandering only increased his bitterness.

Things began to change, though, when Evan got hold of a .22 calibre rifle and took it with him at night. That's when his nocturnal prowling started to bring results — results that made the women in his city virtually targets in a shooting gallery.

It was on an August night that Evan made his first strike. He was driving around in his car, the rifle on the seat beside him, when he saw a woman come out of her house. He slowed down the car and watched the woman cross the street to an outdoor telephone booth, the kind that can be found in the suburbs of almost any large city. Evan stopped the car and waited while the woman made her call, and then, just as she emerged from the phone booth, Evan raised the rifle to his shoulder and triggered off one quick shot. He saw the woman jump as the .22 slug went into her back — and then Evan put the car in gear and drove off.

The shooting, since it wasn't fatal, hardly made a big splash in the newspapers, and so Evan was out again the next night. This time his eye was caught by a happy domestic scene, a husband and wife sitting in their living room. Evan could see them from the road; the drapes

were pulled back from the living room window, and the lamp inside highlighted the pretty face of the young housewife. It was a peaceful scene, something that was seldom duplicated in Evan's own home. He raised the rifle to his shoulder again and pressed the trigger.

Evan's aim was true, but just a split second before he fired, the woman got up from her chair — and that's what saved her life. The bullet slammed into the wall just where her head would have been had she remained seated.

The next night, Evan brought his score up. He was driving by a highway hamburger stand, when he noticed a pretty young woman sitting at the counter and talking to some friends. Evan stopped the car and looked again. The woman seemed happy, and perhaps for a moment Evan wished that he was sitting there and talking to her instead of those other people. It would have been nice; it would have brought him some of the happiness that had been missing from his life.

Evan took the rifle from the car, went into an alley that commanded a view of the hamburger stand, and then raised the rifle and aimed. The woman was just raising a cup of coffee to her lips, and this made a perfect target. It would be just like a shot in the movies — Evan would shoot the cup right out of her hand. It didn't turn out that way. The cup was untouched — but the bullet had gone straight into the woman's head.

Evan had made it this time. It was his first kill.

After this, Evan laid low for a couple of months, but then the urge to prowl with his rifle got the better of him. He started out again, but this time in the morning. By now, the police knew that a killer was stalking the streets with a rifle, and the newspapers were playing it up big. So, Evan changed his habits. He not only switched from night to morning, but also made a slight change in the age of his victim. This time, his bullet struck the arm of a ten-year-old girl standing on the corner.

Evan didn't go out again until about a month after this, but he wasted no time in finding another target. This time he struck in the afternoon, shooting a woman in the leg while she tended to her garden on her front lawn.

The police still couldn't track him down. Evan had had phenomenal luck. He hadn't been seen, and since he had shot at people he didn't know and who weren't in any way connected with him, the police had no way of tracing him.

He waited another month, and then went back to his nightly prowling. His sixth victim was a woman who was in the kitchen of her home near an open window. The bullet from Evan's rifle caught her in the side, and Evan almost chalked up another murder to his credit. The woman pulled through, though, and Evan had had enough for a while.

But four months later, Evan made the mistake of selecting someone he knew for a victim. It was a neighbor of his, and Evan used to visit frequently with the woman and her husband. He gave no indication at all that the woman attracted him greatly, and the couple looked on Evan as just a good friend. But all the time Evan had been yearning for her and keeping it all bottled up inside him.

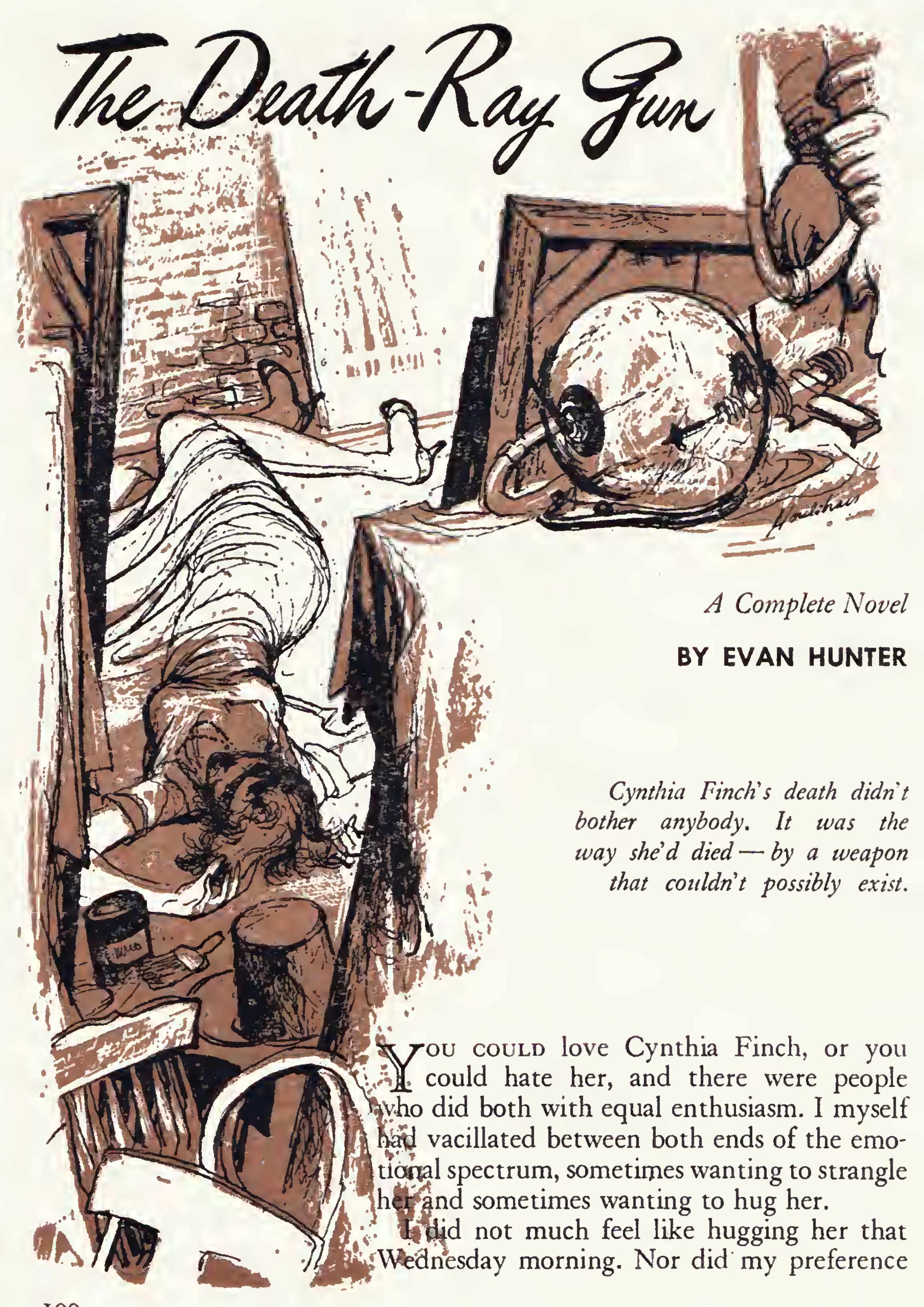
He went to visit her one night when her husband was out, but Evan did nothing more during the evening than sit and watch TV and chat with her. When he left, Evan went and got his rifle and stood on the front lawn and looked at the closed drapes of the living room window. He knew that the woman was sitting in their all by herself watching TV, and, as he had done six times previously, Evan raised the rifle to his shoulder and sent a shot through the living room drapes.

Luckily, he missed the woman — but that shot proved to be the last one for him. It didn't take the police detectives long to bring him in for questioning, since he had been the last one to visit the woman. From then on, it was a simple matter for the police to find out that he was their man. Evan confessed to the whole series of shootings quite calmly.

There was a whole series of attempts to explain Evan's behavior. Psychologists explained that the shootings were a means of working off his sexual frustrations, and Evan himself admitted that he got a "thrill" out of it. One thing is certain, though — there was no thrill for Evan when he stood up in court and heard the judge pronounce the death sentence for his crime.



The Death-Ray Gun



A Complete Novel

BY EVAN HUNTER

Cynthia Finch's death didn't bother anybody. It was the way she'd died — by a weapon that couldn't possibly exist.

YOU COULD love Cynthia Finch, or you could hate her, and there were people who did both with equal enthusiasm. I myself had vacillated between both ends of the emotional spectrum, sometimes wanting to strangle her and sometimes wanting to hug her.

I did not much feel like hugging her that Wednesday morning. Nor did my preference

for murder run toward the gentler form of strangulation. She sat behind her desk in the offices of Bradley and Brooks, and there was that infuriating smile on her face, and I pictured her head on the end of a long pike, and I would have joyously carried that pike through Hell.

"You see, Jon," she said, smiling, her lips tinted a very pale orange, her midnight black hair fluffed around her neck, circling her face like an oval black frame, "it's just not good."

I snorted, but made no other comment. I'd been writing the *Rocketeers* show for a good long time now. I'd been writing it when Alec Norris was producer, and I'd been writing it before him, when fat Felix Nechler held the production reins. I was used to producers coming and going, and I was used to interference and advice from the office boy up. And even if Cynthia Finch was the fair-haired girl of television at the moment, and even if I'd appreciated her calm efficiency after the blundering, bumbling job Norris did, I still did not have to wax enthusiastic when she pulled one of my scripts apart.

"You're thinking I'm all wet, I know," she said, still smiling. "You mustn't misunderstand me when I say this isn't good." She tapped the script with one tapering, delicate hand. "I don't mean it's not good by past standards. I simply mean it doesn't stack up to what we're trying to do *now*."

"And just what is it you're trying to do now, Cynthia?" I asked.

"I'm trying to push *Rocketeers* up into the respectable bracket."

"My writing has been called a lot of things," I said coldly, "but it's never been called unrespectable."

"Your writing is fine," Cynthia said.

"But . . ."

"Yes, but."

"But it isn't respectable." I grinned sourly, picked up the script, and then stood up. "You'll excuse me, Cynthia. I'm going out to get very unrespectably drunk. Then I'm moving over to the *Captain Jet* show. They want science-fiction, and that's what I've been writing for the past five years."

"You're behaving like an adolescent," Cynthia said.

"Am I? Then it's the influence of *Rocketeers*. Look, Cynthia, let's get this straight. I don't mind submitting story ideas, and I don't mind submitting outlines, and I don't even mind submitting step by step treatments. I've listened to you and Perry and Mark, and I've even taken occasional tips from some of the cameramen. But when you suddenly decide the product I've been turning out all along isn't good enough for a lousy juvenile show, it's time to hop into my own little rocket ship and go where I'll be appreciated. It's as simple as all that."

"And you still don't understand," she said sadly.

"I understand one thing, Cynthia, and that is the side upon which my daily bread is buttered."

"Sit down," she said suddenly, "sit down, Jon."

"There's no sense prolonging . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, sit down!"

I sat down reluctantly, sullenly handing her the script when she reached over the desk for it.

"Shall we discuss this like intelligent adults?" she asked. I didn't answer. "All right, here's what's wrong. In the first place, the science is all wet. I know you've been writing just this kind of science for a long time now — but we can't have it that way anymore. It has to be accurate, and it has to be based upon known facts."

"Cynthia . . ."

"You've got, for example, Cadet Holmes sucking in great gobs of oxygen on Mars. Now hell, Jon, spectroscopic tests of Mars have never revealed oxygen in the atmosphere of that planet. That means any oxygen there would be in a quantity less . . ."

". . . than one-thousandth of that in the Earth's atmosphere. Cynthia, you're not telling me anything new."

"Then why is Cadet Holmes breathing oxygen?"

"He's breathing oxygen in this week's sequence, too. Why the sudden complaint?"

"I've had that changed," Cynthia said. "But why do you continue counter to scientific knowledge?"

"Why are there Martians, Cynthia? Do you object to the goddamned Martians?"

"Well, no. Extra-terrestrial beings are good for the show. They . . ."

"Well, go ask your high-priced science expert if Martians are likely to be found on Mars. Look. Martians come into the sequence two weeks from now. They breathe, and that's impossible. So I have Holmes breathing in the current sequence, and he has to continue breathing."

"I told you I've already changed that."

"Then why the hell bring it up?"

"Because there are more important things wrong with the script. For example, you've got this Martian disease that shows all the symptoms of food poisoning. For God's sake, Jon, International Foods is our sponsor."

"Shove our sponsor," I said.

"All right, do that, if you're not interested in getting paid for what you write. But don't forget the mothers who watch the show, too. And don't forget that the biggest problem they have with their kids is feeding."

"Do you know the limerick starting, 'A woman who triplets begat'?"

"No. So you throw in food poisoning, a delightful excuse for every kid who doesn't feel like eating *Poppsies.*"

"*Poppsies*, shmoppsies. Are you running a TV show or a luncheonette?"

"Here's another thing," Cynthia

said. "You've got *The Marauder's* mind captured by the Martians, and they force him to do dastardly things. The kids don't know his mind is captured until the end of the sequence. All they see is their good old friend *Marauder* behaving like a bastard. So all these months we strive to build a father image, and you come along and wreck the whole thing in a week."

"Why don't you get Sigmund Freud to write your show?" I said. "He knows all about father images. Me, I'm just an underpaid writer."

"Jon . . ."

"Jon me not, Cynthia." I stood up, took the script from her desk, and stuffed it into my briefcase. "We sang a duet, doll, but the show closed."

"You're walking out then?"

"Aye. That I am. I've destroyed too many father images."

"Jon . . ."

"Honey, you've got the nicest legs at Bradley and Brooks. You're a pretty enough creature, and sometimes I love you to pieces. But I turned to writing after I got rid of Ulcer Number One, and I don't want to start on Number Two — not while I'm only twenty-nine. So off I am to *Captain Jet*, where the legs and faces may not be as pretty, but where I won't have to worry about the number of doom rays I use, or the Oedipus complexes of my lizard-like Venusians."

"What about the current sequence?" Cynthia asked.

"I'll stick it through. I'm going down to the studio now in fact. Jonny on the spot, they call me. Always willing to help."

Cynthia Finch did not look happy when I left her, but I did not much give a damn about her state of mind. When someone tried to take an acknowledged hack show and shove it up into the *Studio One* bracket, it was time for me to fold my tent. And my typewriter. I started down the large, open-door-flanked corridor of Bradley and Brooks, the advertising outfit that was handling *Rocketeers* and a half-dozen other radio and TV shows for International Foods.

I passed 32b unconsciously, and I whirled abruptly when the voice hissed, "Hey, you!"

Andrea Mann stood in the open doorway to 32b, leaning against the doorjamb like the stereotyped picture of a Panamanian beauty. She narrowed her eyes in exaggeration and said, "Want a date, mister?"

"What'll it cost?" I asked, smiling at her playacting.

"The best in New York," she said, and she wiggled her hips a little. Andrea was a small blonde who proved the adage about good things coming in small packages. "Won't cost you much more than a dinner and movie."

"That's too expensive. See you, Andy."

"Hey, rat," she said, dropping the loose girl pose. "Weren't you even going to stop and say hello?"

"Hello," I said.

Andy came out of the doorway, and grabbed my arm, yanking me back into her office. "It's a good thing I love you," she said.

"It's a good thing *somebody* loves me," I told her.

"Trouble with the Lord High Executioner?" She moved her head towards Cynthia's office down the hallway.

"No more trouble," I answered. "Finished, done, over with. I am now, as they say in Variety, at liberty."

"You quit!" Andy burst.

"I did."

"You didn't!"

"But I did, I did."

"But why," she said, distressed. "Jon, you didn't really."

"Father images running rampant," I said cryptically. "I really did tender my resignation, Andy doll, and how about that dinner and movie this evening?"

"Can you afford it?" she asked, smiling.

"I'll hock my typewriter."

"I was kidding about . . ."

"Yes or no? I'm due at the studio."

"Yes. But you said you'd quit?"

"Eight o'clock okay? I did quit. I'm tying up the loose ends."

"Eight is fine."

I left her smiling in the doorway to 32b, and when I reached the lobby of the swank Madison Avenue building, I located a phone booth and called Tom Goldin, my agent. When I'd passed his battery of secretaries and assistants, I said, "Hello, Tom. Good news."

"Yeah?" Tom said drily. "Did Cynthia Finch drop dead?"

"Better. I dropped her dead."

"What?"

"I quit the show, Tom."

"You crazy son," Tom said. "Why'd you do that?"

"Food poisoning."

"What? How's that again?"

"Relax, Tom. I've got friends at *Captain Jet*. I'm going over to the studio now, but after rehearsal I'll drop in to see Binx."

"Binx is just as crazy as Cynthia," Tom said drily. "Besides, his legs ain't as pretty."

"His money is just as pretty," I said.

"What's money?" Tom asked. "Can you buy happiness with money?"

"No. But can you buy money with happiness?"

"Ha-ha," Tom said. "Very funny."

"You'll get the ten percent, so stop kicking. What's new on the novel?"

"Did somebody write a novel?" Tom asked.

"No takers yet?"

"No, not yet. I'm having lunch with a guy at Simon and Schuster tomorrow. Maybe I can fool him into taking it."

"That's why I love you, Tom. Your coat is so warm."

"I love you too," he said. "You shouldn't have quit Cynthia."

"'Bye-'bye, Thomas."

"Hey, just a . . ."

I hung up, grinning, and then walked out of the building to hail a cab. The studio was in the loft of what used to be a factory. The station had done wonders with the loft, and if you didn't have to climb up through two deserted stories, you'd never suspect you were in an abandoned factory.

I walked up the clattering iron steps, and then into the studio, waving at Artie Schaefer in the control booth, and then stepping onto the floor. I took a seat up front, and watched the cameramen dolly in for a closeup of *Marauder*. Dave Halliday, the show's director, held a mike in one hamlike fist, and he brought the mike closer to his face now.

"That you, Jon?" he asked.

"That's me," I shouted.

"Want to come up here a minute? We're having a little trouble."

2.

I left my brief case on the seat of my chair, and walked past the cameras and onto the brilliantly lit portion of the studio. The set designers had really gone all out with the Martian landscape. They had a bunch of weird looking plants, and a couple of tons of interplanetary sand strewn all over the stage. In the distance, painted against a very realistic-looking sky, was Earth and its satellite, the Moon.

Marauder, an actor who normally used the name Fred Folsom, stood by with a godawful-looking contraption strapped onto his head. He also had what appeared to be fifty pound oxygen cylinders strapped to his back. I looked through the contraption at his face, and Fred Folsom seemed positively miserable.

Dave took my hand, shook it briefly, almost crushing my knuckles, and then said, "You're late."

"I had a session with Cynthia," I said.

"Oh?" Dave was a heavy man with a round, cherubic face, and a lot of beer fat around his middle. He raised shaggy brown eyebrows now, and a devilish smile marred the cherub's look. "Make out?" he asked.

"Do rabbits make out?" I kidded.

Dave shrugged massive shoulders, and the inflated tire around his middle nudged up toward his chest. "Well, we got troubles," he said. "Is Cynthia coming down?"

"She didn't say."

"So tell me," Dave said, "how we supposed to hear anyone through these goddamn helmets?"

"What goddamn helmets?"

Fred Folsom said something behind the contraption on his head, but all I heard was a sullen mumble.

"I didn't write any helmets," I said.

"I know," Dave answered, shrugging again. "Cynthia says there's no oxygen on Mars, though."

"Did Cynthia also tell you about the gravity on Mars?"

"Gravity?" Dave Halliday looked puzzled.

"Oh, what the hell! Throw the helmets away. Forget the oxygen."

"Cynthia says no."

"Then give your boys face masks. They'll just cover the noses, and you'll be able to hear something other than Martian rumblings."

"You hear that, Stu?" Dave called.

Stu Shaughnessy, the show's prop man, looked up from a pad and nodded. Stu was a thin-faced man with serious brown eyes behind black-rimmed bop classes. He attacked his job as prop man with the same intensity a physicist gave the atomic bomb, and he exhibited the same pride in the completed product.

"Take off the helmet, Fred," Dave said. "We'll play it straight until Stu gets the masks for us."

Fred Folsom took off the helmet and sighed, and Dave said, "We got another problem, Jon. The death-ray gun."

"What about it?" I said wearily.

"Cynthia says it's impossible."

"Cynthia is impossible, damnit. What's wrong with it?"

"It's supposed to burn a man to cinders. She says a weapon that small wouldn't be capable of containing the energy necessary to . . ."

"Make it a larger weapon. For Christ's sake!"

"You got that, Stu?" Dave called.

"I'll fix it," Stu answered. His voice was quiet, and he nodded resolutely. There was no doubt he'd fix it. Fred reached into the holster at his waist and pulled out the ultra-modern death-ray gun, hefting it on his palm. He pulled the trigger, and a shower of harmless sparks drifted from the disc-surrounded spray nozzle.

"Point that the other way," Dave said.

Fred smiled. "Dave is going Martian," he explained. "He thinks all the props Stu rigs are real."

"That's the only way to direct it," Dave said. "Let's run it through, yes? You're sticking around, aren't you, Jon?"

"Like a dirty shirt," I said.

"The letdown is all on film," Dave explained to me. "A really nice job, Jon. I think you'll like it. Jets blasting, all that junk. You watch it on the monitor."

"I will," I said.

"We pick up *Marauder* on a boom shot, looking straight down on him. All you see is the top of his head and his ray gun sticking out in front of him — that and the Martian sand. It's a nice effect. Besides, we cut out the necessity of having the ship right on the set, you follow?"

"I follow."

"After *Marauder* is in, we pick up Cadet Holmes. As if suddenly remembering, Dave put his mike to his mouth and shouted, "On stage, Cadet Holmes. Let's roll!"

I took a seat near the monitor, and watched the film of *Marauder's* ship putting down on sands of Mars. I

was really interested until Cynthia's voice behind me said, "Isn't he supposed to be braking for descent before this?"

I turned. "Hello, Professor," I said.

"You think it's funny," Cynthia said, pouting. She looked pretty as hell when she pouted, and she knew it. "I'm interested in getting a good show."

"You *are* getting one," I told her. I watched the monitor as the boom camera picked up *Marauder*, and then Cadet Holmes came onto the screen.

"Where are their helmets?" Cynthia said. "And are they still using those stupid guns? I told Dave . . ."

"Stu's working on that now. Relax, Cynthia."

Instead of relaxing, Cynthia Finch strode away from me purposefully. She stopped alongside Dave, said a few words to him, and Dave bellowed, "Cut, cut."

The actors slouched into weary positions while Cynthia kept chewing out Dave. Then Dave said, "Take a break, fellows," and I heard Cynthia's voice, close to his mike, say, "If Stu is working on it, I want to see it."

"All right, all right," Dave said irritably. "Come on."

The mike picked up his voice and tossed it around the studio, and then he and Cynthia walked away from the lights and into the blackness. *Marauder* and Cadet Holmes had already disappeared into blackness. I lighted a cigarette, and then headed for the control booth, figuring I'd bandy a few words about with Artie Schaefer. The booth was empty when I got there, though, so I strolled out to the stairwell and looked through one of the windows at the rooftops of New York, puffing happily on my cigarette. I ground the butt out under my heel, lounged around for another ten minutes, and then went back into the studio.

Dave was fiddling around with one of the plants on the set. Stu was handing both *Marauder* and Cadet Holmes their new death-ray guns and face masks. Artie Schaefer was back in the booth. I took my seat near the monitor again, and that was when I spotted old Felix Nechler, the guy who used to produce *Rocketeers*. I got up, walked over to him, and took his hand.

"Hello, Felix," I said, "how goes it?"

Felix was a thin man with a trim black mustache. He looked up sadly and said, "Hello, Jon. So-so, I guess."

"Back for a looksee at the old baby, eh Felix? How long have you been here?"

"Few minutes," Felix said, his grey eyes dull.

"Okay, we're ready to go now," Dave called into the mike. "You out there, Cynthia?"

"She's not here, Dave," I shouted.

"Scare her up, will you, Jon? She'll want to watch this."

"Where is she?"

"Piddling around out there someplace," he said into the mike.

"Excuse me, Felix," I said. "I'll be back."

"Sure," Felix answered. "I was about to leave anyway."

"Oh, stick around. You'll enjoy it."

Felix shrugged, the shrug plainly stating he would probably not enjoy anything produced by the woman who'd taken his job. I started off around the studio, walking past the rocket ship interior set, and then over past the Earth Control Office set, both unilluminated now. Then I strolled around back to the cubbyhole where Stu kept his props, and then over to where the flats were piled against the inside brick wall of the building.

"Cynthia?"

When I got no answer, I walked past the flats, and the first thing that hit me was the overwhelming stench, and I thought someone was burning garbage right here in the building, and I knew Cynthia would have a fit about that. I kept walking in the darkness, the stench overpowering now, and that was when I tripped and fell.

I got to my knees cursing. I reached down and groped for what I'd tripped over, and I found the stench and I found soft flesh, and I reared back in what must have been stark terror. I hit the wall, and my fingers groped for the light switch. I scraped my knuckles, finally found the switch, and flicked on the light.

Cynthia Finch lay on her back on the concrete floor.

"Douse that goddamned light!" Dave yelled into his mike.

I stood over against the wall and looked down at her. I knew it was Cynthia because of the dress. It was a blue woolen number that hugged her flesh, only now it was scorched down the front, and the fabric had browned and parted to show the blistering flesh underneath. Her face was an unrecognizable, charred, burned mass of skin and bones.

"Hey, how about it?" Dave shouted again. "We're trying to run this through, you know."

"Dave!" I yelled when I'd caught my breath. "Come back here! Quick!"

I didn't move from my spot near the wall. I stood there even when I heard many running footsteps, even when I heard Dave mutter, "Oh God! Oh, holy, holy God!"

And then *Marauder*, and Cadet Holmes and Stu Shaughnessy and even old Felix Nechler were standing around the charred, lifeless body on the concrete floor, and *Marauder* took one look at the ominously cumbersome death-ray gun in his fist, and dropped it to the concrete as if it were alive.

3.

Detective-Sergeant Hilton could have been a high-priced performer on *Dragnet*. Perhaps he watched the show. He had an underplayed, natu-

ral delivery and an inscrutable face, and he went about his business with the calm detachment of a shoe clerk at I. Miller's.

"You found her?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, still a little sick at what I'd discovered.

"Just like that, sir? Burned all over?"

"Just like that, Sergeant."

"Mmm. Hell of a way to die." Hilton stroked his lean jaw and shoved his fedora to the back of his head. "And the rest of you were all on the set when Mr. . . ." Hilton paused. "What's your name again, sir?" he asked me.

"Jonathan Crane."

"Nice name," Hilton said conversationally. "Your own?"

"It is now."

"You an actor?"

"Writer."

"Do any mystery stuff?"

"Science-fiction," I said, and Hilton seemed to lose all interest immediately.

"You were all on the set, is that right, when Mr. Crane discovered the body?"

"I wasn't," Felix Nechler said.

"Where were you?"

"I was sitting near the monitor."

"Are you connected with the show, Mr. Nechler?" Hilton asked.

"No," Felix said, embarrassed.

"What were you doing here then?"

"I thought . . ." Felix hesitated, then seemed to make up his mind, and blurted, "I thought Cynthia might have a job for me."

"Did you talk to her before she was killed?"

"No. I was waiting out here for her."

Hilton turned to Dave. "When did you see her last, Mr. Halliday?"

"Back in Stu's prop room," Dave said. He looked at Stu, and his voice carried a muted accusation.

"And what was she doing then?"

"Stu had given her the . . . the death-ray gun. He was showing her how it operated."

"The *what* gun?"

"Look, Sergeant," Stu broke in, his eyes serious behind their black-rimmed bop glasses. "The gun is just . . ."

"What kind of gun did you say?"

"The death-ray gun," Dave said more firmly.

"It's just a plastic gimmick," Stu said hurriedly. "A few batteries and some flint. Here, I'll show you."

He unhooked the flap on Cadet Holmes' holster and pulled out the unwieldy weapon. He was ready to squeeze the trigger when Hilton said, "The other way, please."

Stu shrugged. "It's a harmless thing," he said. He pointed the gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. There was the harsh scrape of metal against flint, a burst of spark, and then the nozzle of the gun seemed to glow and a cascade of sparks showered from the open end. "Harmless," Stu said.

"She was holding this gun when Mr. Halliday left you?"

"Yes," Stu said. He gave the gun

back to Cadet Holmes, the fifteen-year-old boy from the High School of Performing Arts. Cadet Holmes' face was a chalky white, his eyes fear-filled.

"She was burned to death," Dave said suddenly.

"But not with that toy," Hilton said. "Looks more like someone used a blowtorch."

"No blowtorches around here," Dave said emphatically.

"I'll have my men look the place over," Hilton said drily. "Mr. Shaughnessy, where did Miss Finch go when you left her?"

"I don't know. She said the gun was okay, and told me to bring it out together with the oxygen masks. I left her in the prop room."

"And what about you, Mr. Halliday? Did you come directly back to the set when you left Miss Finch and Mr. Shaughnessy?"

"No," Dave said. "Matter of fact, I didn't. I stopped at the fountain for a drink of water. Then I went around and checked the Earth Control Office set."

"How long did all that take?"

"About ten minutes."

"Uh-huh. Were you two on the set all this time?" he asked *Marauder* and Cadet Holmes.

"No. We went down for a cup of coffee," *Marauder* answered.

"Together?"

"No," Cadet Holmes said, his face still white. "I left Fred just outside the building. When we came back, Dave was ready to roll."

"You meet anyone at coffee, Mr. Folsom?" Hilton asked.

"No. No one," *Marauder* answered.

"Where'd you go, Cadet?"

"His name's Findlay," Dave put in.

"Where'd you go?"

"Just took a walk around the block, that's all."

"Meet anyone?"

"On the way back, yes."

"Who?"

"Artie Schaefer, our engineer."

"Where had he been?"

"I don't know, sir," Findlay said, almost trembling now. "You'll have to ask him, I guess."

"I will." Hilton wiped his hand over his face. "All right, Mr. Crane, where were you all this time?"

"Out in the hallway," I said, "having a cigarette."

"Anyone see you?"

"Why . . . no. I don't think so."

Hilton sighed. "And you, Mr. Nechler?"

"I took a seat near the monitor when I came in, and I stayed there all the while."

"I don't suppose anyone saw you."

"Not unless someone was in the control booth. I didn't see anyone there."

Hilton looked disgusted. "Nobody around when she got it," he said, "and nobody saw anybody where he said he was. This is just great."

"I was seen by the guy in the coffee shop," *Marauder* said defensively.

"Think he could pinpoint the time? It only takes a minute to kill someone."

"You don't think . . ."

"I want to talk to Mr. Schaefer. He was probably out walking his French poodle, only no one saw him except on the way back."

"He didn't have a poodle with him," Findlay said helpfully.

"A Great Dane?" Hilton asked, then waved Findlay's answer aside before he spoke it. "You go about your business. I know you've got a daily show to put on. Don't mind my boys."

"Whoever did this will get the chair, won't he, Sergeant?" Dave Halliday asked.

Detective-Sergeant Hilton assumed his best *Dragnet* manner. "Sure," he said. "There's just one thing."

Dave, an avid *Dragnet* viewer himself, supplied the straight man's like. "What's that, Sergeant?"

"We got to get him first."

4.

When I stopped by for Andy that night at eight, she'd already heard the news. She did not pretend great sadness because Andy was an honest kid, and she'd never really liked Cynthia Finch. Andy wrote the commercials for the *Rocketeers* show, and Cynthia's conception of a producer's tasks included the censorship of the nonsensical drivel Andy wrote in praise of *Poppsies* and its sister breakfast cereal, *Cracklies*.

One of Andy's choice commercials had consisted of the repeated line, "Eat *Poppsies*, they're tops, see, they POP, see?" This done in a parrot's falsetto. It was good.

Cynthia had stepped in and changed it to: Buy me *Poppsies*, Popsy! They're tops, see, they POP, see, Popsy?

By the time anyone untangled that, he was ready for a straight-jacket. He was *not* ready to rush out and buy a box, as the copy suggested after the parrot had finished his speech.

She opened the door and led me into her living room, and then she asked, "Have the police been hard on you, Jon?"

"No harder than on anyone else," I said. I chuckled a little and added, "This Sergeant Hilton has his hands full. Only Artie Schaefer and the Cadet have alibis, and even they aren't too strong. Hell of a case."

"Is it true about . . . about how she died?"

"Yes."

"It must have been horrible," Andy said, shuddering a little.

"I don't imagine it was pleasant. Dave still thinks the goddamned ray gun did it."

"Oh, not really."

"You know Dave. I think he believes in BEM's, too. He doesn't know that bug-eyed monsters left the science-fiction scene a dozen years ago."

"I was worried about you," Andy said. She fluffed out her blonde hair,

then walked to a cigarette canister on the end table, taking one and lighting it quickly. She blew out a wreath of smoke. "Really worried, Jon."

"Oh? That's awfully nice of you."

"I could hardly get the new *Cracklies* limerick going."

"That denotes real worry," I said.

"I've got it, though. Want to hear it?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"*Buy Cracklies, by crackie!* Over and over again, repeated. Like?"

"I'm an eggs-for-breakfast man," I said.

"I think it's good. Considering the worrying I did."

"You had no cause for worry."

"*You* seemed pretty damned worried," Andy said, turning suddenly.

"Huh? I don't follow."

"When you called."

"When *I* called?" I lifted my eyebrows. "Sorry," I said, "wrong number."

"Well, no one even asked me."

"Asked you what? Make sense, Andy."

"Asked me about what you'd told me."

I let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, ma'm, but I missed the first reel. Want to start from scratch?"

"When you called this afternoon," Andy said, impatiently.

"Honey," I told her. "I didn't call this afternoon. And if I'd made any calls, they'd have all been to my lawyer."

Andy stared at me curiously for a few moments. Then she smiled and said, "Jon, really, there's no need for any cloak and dagger. I won't tell anyone, if you're worried about it, and you needn't deny having called."

"Won't tell anyone what? God-damnit, Andy, I didn't call you. The last time I spoke to you was at the agency."

Andy looked extremely puzzled. "Well now isn't that strange," she said.

"It certainly is, I agreed. "Did someone call and say it was me?"

"Well, no. But the voice . . . well, I just assumed it was you."

"What did this mysterious caller say?"

"He said, well he said, 'Is this Andy?' and I said, 'Yes, it is.' "

"That's all?"

"No, of course not. He said, 'Listen and listen hard, Andy.' That's when I figured it was you calling."

"What else did he say?"

"He said, 'I want you to forget everything I told you this morning. Everything, understand? Especially when the police start asking questions.' " Andy shrugged. "Golly, I was sure it was you."

"What did you answer?"

"I said, 'Okay, Trigger, I'm a clam.' Honestly, Jon, I thought it was you clowning around."

"What happened then."

"He just hung up. I thought that was strange, and then later, when the news about Cynthia reached the office I figured you wanted me to

keep quiet about what you'd told me, about quitting the job. I thought . . . I thought maybe you were involved."

"For Pete's sake!"

"Well, how was I supposed to know? It sounded like you, and I thought immediately of you, and besides I was in the middle of that damned *Cracklies* limerick."

She looked as if she were ready to start bawling, so I went to her and took her into my arms, and she snuggled her head against my chest.

"You're a rotten louse, Jonathan Crane."

"I know," I said.

"And I knew you when your damned name was plain Johnny Kransen."

"I know," I said.

"And I *was* worried."

"You're a doll."

"Sure."

"You are. I mean it. You're a doll on wheels."

"Sure."

"Do you still want dinner and a movie?"

"Yes," timidly.

"Then go fix your face. Come on, doll."

"Don't call me 'doll.' I'm not one of the office dolls you flirt with every day."

"I know you're not."

Andy tried to keep a stern face, but the smile broke through like filtered sunshine. "I'll powder up, you rat," she said.

"Hey!" I said, snapping my fingers. "Whoever called you was obviously someone who'd told you something this morning. Who'd you speak to this morning?"

Andy batted her eyelashes. "Lots of people," she said.

"Who?"

"Cynthia. You."

"Who else?"

"Dave Halliday, I guess. Yes, he came in to see Cynthia about oxygen on . . ." Andy paused. "Oxygen on Mars?"

"Yes. Did he say anything to you?"

"Sure, lots of things. But I don't remember them all."

"Anything important?"

"No. No, unless . . .well, I've heard a million people say that."

"Say what?"

"Well, he said, well, he was complaining about the oxygen business. He said, 'Someday I'm going to murder that meddling witch.' " Andy paused again. "Only he didn't say witch."

"Who else did you see?"

"Artie Schaefer. Stopped by for some film stuff, I think. He came into my office to say hello."

"Anything from him?"

"I can't remember. Just the usual pleasantries, I guess."

"*Marauder?* The Cadet?"

"No, neither of them. At least, if they were at the agency, I didn't see them."

"Felix Nechler?"

"Why, yes. Isn't that curious? He told me he wanted to see Cynthia

about a job. He's a nice old duck, isn't he?"

"Did he say anything else?"

"Well, Cynthia's secretary spoke to him, and he was pretty angry afterwards. She told him Cynthia was very busy and would be leaving for the studio in a little while. Pretty shabby treatment."

"He probably came down to catch her there then," I said.

"Was he there when she . . ."

"Yes."

"Jon . . ."

"Yes?"

"You . . . you didn't kill her, did you? I mean . . ."

"Me? Hell, I haven't killed anyone since last Wednesday."

"Seriously, Jon. I . . . I'd like to know."

"You are the craziest female I've ever met," I told her. "No, I did not kill anyone."

Andy smiled. "I'd have brought you cigarettes and a cake with a file in it."

"You probably would."

"So undying is my love. I'll go powder up, and you'd better be here when I come back, you rat."

"There's a cute number down the hall," I reminded her.

"How do you know?" she said suspiciously.

"There's always a cute number down the hall."

Andy considered this seriously. "I'll be ten seconds," she promised, and she wasn't seven minutes over that.

5.

When my doorbell chimed noisily at twenty minutes past ten the next morning, I was still in bed. I frowned at the alarm clock until I realized it was innocent, and then pulled on a robe over my pajamas and walked through the living room.

I opened the door a crack, and Detective-Sergeant Hilton's inscrutable face peered back at me. Another inscrutable face was behind his.

"My partner," he explained. "Ed Matthews."

"Mrfff," I said.

"May we come in? Hope we didn't wake you?"

"No," I said grumpily. "I had to get up to answer the door anyway."

Hilton's face remained inscrutable, and I decided I'd save my knife-edged wit for a worthier audience. "Come on in, boys."

I flung the door wide, turned my back on it, and walked into the living room. Andy and I had done our best to drink up all the scotch in the City of New York the night before, and whereas Andy's recuperative powers were amazing, mine were a little less spectacular. I lighted a cigarette to take the taste of the motorman's glove out of my mouth. The cigarette did not help. I looked down at it sourly, and then remembered the detectives.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Few questions," Hilton said. "Routine."

"All right."

"First, is it true you saw Cynthia Finch in her office along about eleven-thirty yesterday morning?"

"Yes," I said.

"Is it also true you quit your job at that time?"

"Yes."

"Is it true you and Miss Finch had what might be termed an argument?"

"No," I said.

Hilton reached into his jacket pocket and came out with a glossy photograph which he extended to me dangling from his thumb and forefinger. "Know her?" he asked.

I took the photograph from his fingers, studied it, and passed it back. "Yes. She's Cynthia's secretary."

"Did you kill Miss Finch?" Hilton asked conversationally.

"Sure. I kill all women with black hair. My stepmother had black hair."

Hilton sighed and put the photograph back into his pocket. "She says she heard you arguing with Miss Finch yesterday."

"She's a bird-brain. She wouldn't know an argument if it hit her in the face with a brick."

"She says you raised your voice. She heard it all the way from her desk outside."

"She was probably listening at the keyhole. Cynthia and I were not arguing. We were discussing a script of mine. We discussed it like ladies and gents. No threats of murder, no nothing. Then I quit."

"How much does Bradley and Brooks pay you for the *Rocketeers* show, Mr. Crane?" Hilton's partner asked suspiciously.

"Why?"

"Routine."

"Seven-fifty for a week's sequence. Fifteen hundred for a two-week's sequence. What's that go to do with the price of fish?"

"I got some ideas about you," Hilton's partner said.

"Let me hear them," I told him.

"Maybe she fired you."

"I quit."

"Maybe she fired you, and you didn't like the idea of losing all that easy money."

"Sure. Maybe I started the San Francisco fire, too."

"Don't get smart, Crane," Hilton's partner said ominously.

"I can't help it. I'm that way naturally. We did not argue, and I was not fired. We had a normal discussion, and I quit. I can get a job in ten seconds over at *Captain Jet*. So your idea about me is a stinkeroo."

"That's what you say," Hilton's partner said. "Anyway, don't you leave town, Crane."

"Oh, for Pete's sake."

"What's the matter?" Hilton asked.

"Haven't you got a detective who doesn't read Ellery Queen?"

"I don't read Ellery Queen," Hilton's partner said belligerently.

"Reading is an acquired skill," I told him. "Stick with it, give it time."

"Wise guy," he mumbled.

"I have to get down to the studio soon," I told him. "I suppose I'll see you both there."

"We still haven't found the blowtorch, you know."

"Assuming it was one."

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe the death-ray gun did it."

"Wise guy," Hilton's partner mumbled again.

They went to the door, and I watched them go. I lighted another cigarette, and then remembered I'd forgotten to tell them Andy's story. I opened the door and looked over to the elevator banks, but the two sleuths were already gone. I shrugged and made a mental note to tell Hilton about it at the studio. Then I showered, shaved, ate, dressed, and left the apartment.

I stopped over to see Binx Bailey at ABC, and he told me he'd be happy to give me a trial run, and why didn't I come over and watch the show to get the slant some afternoon. I told him I would, and then I caught a cab crosstown to Tom Goldin's office, remembering after I got there that he had a luncheon appointment, and Tom eats lunch early. So I stopped for a cup of coffee in a drugstore, spotted the phone booths, and gave Andy a call.

"Hello," I said, "how's the head?"

"Dandy," she said. "How's yours?"

"Ouch."

"You drink too much," she said solemnly.

"Or not enough of the right stuff, anyway. Listen, have you recalled anything further about the people who spoke to you yesterday?"

"Did I tell you that Stu Shaughnessy stopped by?"

"No, you didn't."

"Well, he had. He was sore as hell about the way Cynthia constantly changes her mind about props. He said his budget wasn't high enough to permit constant changes and substitutions."

"How come all these people stop to weep on your shoulder?"

"I'm an attractive young lady," Andy said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Someday I'll show you."

"When?"

"Someday."

"Sure." I paused and thought for a minute, and then said, "Does any of that drivel sound like talk preceding a murder?"

"You mean the conversations with everyone?"

"Yes."

"No, it doesn't. I've been wracking my brain all morning, trying to think of something that sounded incriminating, something that necessitated a warning. I can't think of a blamed thing, Jon."

"Maybe you invented the phone call," I said. "Maybe *you* killed Cynthia Finch."

"I'd have liked to, sometimes — but I didn't."

"I'm going over to the studio," I said. "If you think of anything . . .',

"I'll call you."

"'Bye, doll."

"Did I tell you I love you this morning?" Andy asked suddenly.

"No."

"I'm slipping. I love you, you big boob."

"Go write a limerick," I told her, and then I hung up, smiling.

6.

The studio was unusually quiet when I got there. There were a few cameramen on the floor, but no one else was in sight. I lighted a cigarette and went around back, opening the door to the control booth. Artie Schaefer was standing near one of the turntables, a cigarette end glowing in the dimness. He brought the cigarette to his mouth, took a preoccupied drag on it, and then stared out through the glass, out over the studio floor.

"Dead today," I said.

Artie looked up suddenly. "Wh . . : oh, hello, Jon."

"Hope I didn't break in on a thought fest," I said.

"No, I was just . . . come in, come in." He walked to the table behind the wide glass front of the booth, hooked an ashtray with one finger and snuffed out his cigarette. Artie was a tall man with kinky black hair and a magnificent profile. He'd made a good living out of radio, and he was now making a better living out of television. *Rocketeers* was only one of his shows, and he was generally conceded to be the best engineer in the business.

"Nobody in yet?" I asked.

"I saw Dave a few minutes ago," Artie said. "None of the cast are here yet, though."

"What do you think of yesterday?" I asked.

"Only yesterday," he said, seeming to be still lost in thought. "Seems like it happened a long, long time ago, doesn't it?"

"Who are you picking?"

"I don't know, Jon. I honestly can't figure it. I mean, Cynthia . . . well, who'd want to kill Cynthia?"

"Lots of people have considered it," I told him.

He seemed honestly surprised. "Really? A sweet kid like her? I can't believe it."

"Did you know her very well, Artie?"

"We dated a few times." He looked up suddenly. "I've already told that to Sherlock Holmes. I don't suppose it's a secret, anyway."

"Anything . . . serious?"

"No, just a few dates. I liked her company. She was levelheaded and intelligent, and I liked what she was trying to do with the show."

I didn't say anything because I'd been one of those who *hadn't* liked what she was trying to do with the show. Artie sensed this and he added, "Hell, you can't blame her for wanting to give it class."

"I'm not blaming her," I said.

"She gave you a rough time with your scripts, did she?"

"She did, but that doesn't matter. Not now it doesn't."

"No, not now," he agreed. He suddenly slapped the table top with his open palm. "Dammit, who'd want to kill her? You really think some stupid character would kill her because of the way she was running things? You really think that?"

"I don't know, Artie."

"You've got to be twisted to do something like that — really twisted, rotten inside." He shook his head. "You can't be normal and kill someone like Cynthia Finch."

"I suppose not."

Artie sighed wearily, passed a hand over his classic nose, and then gestured through the glass of the booth. "There's Dave now," he said.

"I'd better get down there," I said.

"Sure. Ask him to let me know when he's ready to test, will you?"

"Okay," I said. I left the booth and went down to the floor. Dave was walking with his head bent, as if he were looking for clues in the concrete.

"Find anything?" I asked.

He looked up and shook his massive head. "I was looking for a blowtorch," he said.

"The police didn't turn one up, did they?"

"No. But they don't know the studio as well as I do."

"Did you find it?"

"No," Dave said sadly. He looked at me solemnly for a moment, and said, "Come over here, will you?"

"Sure," I said, surprised. I followed him over to the rocket ship interior set, and Dave pulled up an aluminum stool near the port blister. Outside the blister, a painted backdrop of black space and brilliant white stars showed above Dave's head. "I . . . I want some advice."

"Sure," I said. "What is it?"

Dave reached for a pair of calipers hanging on a string from the ship's plotting board. He held them in his beefy hands, opening and closing the pointed tips. "I've been wondering whether or not I should tell Hilton something. I figure he'll find out anyway, but I sure as hell don't want to get involved. Do you follow me?"

"So far. What is it you think he should know?"

Dave sucked in a heavy breath. "Cynthia and I were married," he said.

"What?"

"Not now. I mean, not when she was killed. This was a long time ago, Jon. We were both kids, and it didn't work out. I mean, well we went our separate ways. We were both in radio at the time, but Cynthia started fooling around with the theatre . . . well, I never guessed we'd both end up in television, and certainly not on the same damned show." He looked at me mournfully.

"But you're divorced," I said.

"Yes. A long time ago. In fact, Cynthia had the marriage annulled. It was the best thing, Jon. We . . . we didn't get along too well. I mean,

we got along fine now, before she was killed, but it was different when we were married. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I should tell Hilton?"

"I think so, yes."

"You don't think he'd misconstrue it? I mean, he won't think I killed her because I was once married to her? You don't think so?"

"He seems fairly intelligent," I said, "if a bit obvious in his tactics."

"That's what I figured. But . . ." Dave shook his head again. "It's a hard decision to make. I don't want to get involved in this, you know. I mean, what the hell, she was the same to me as to anyone else. The marriage was a long time ago."

"I understand, Dave."

"Well, thanks," he said heavily. "I guess I will tell him."

"I think that'd be best."

"Yeah, I guess so." He still didn't seem convinced. I left him to worry it out, telling him I was going down for a cup of coffee until the cast showed up. I was heading down the iron steps when I met Detective-Sergeant Hilton, minus his partner this time.

"Hello, Sergeant," I said.

"Ah, Crane," he answered, nodding. "Where you bound?"

"Cup of coffee," I said.

"Mind if I come along?"

"Well . . ." I hesitated. "No, not at all."

"Thanks," he said. He turned, and we walked down the steps together, and out into the street. We didn't say anything on the walk to the luncheonette, and the silence persisted until we'd both been served our coffee. Hilton stirred his, took a sip at it, and then put the cup back in the saucer.

"Got a few interesting items from the coroner and the lab boys," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Oh?" I bit into my toasted English, sipped at my coffee, which was too hot, and looked at him interestedly.

"Yeah," he said. His face was not as inscrutable now, nor did he affect the preoccupied, business-man cop attitude any longer. He could have been a close friend of mine discussing the plot for a new story. "Coroner says the burns didn't kill her."

This surprised me. I didn't say anything, but I continued to look at Hilton. He nodded and said, "Back of her skull was cracked open. Coroner figures it happened when she hit the concrete floor."

"But the burns . . ."

"Not really bad ones, and not enough to kill her instantly. Most burns won't. We had a cop caught in a gas explosion once, and he came running out of the building like a goddamned torch. The pain was terrific, but he was conscious all the way to the hospital, and he didn't go out until the doctors gave him morphine. And he didn't die until four hours later. First degree burns, too. So even if a blow torch *was* used on

Miss Finch, it's doubtful she'd have been killed instantly."

"What do you figure then?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I can't picture someone deliberately setting fire to her, and yet it all points to that. She probably went up in flames, reared back, fell, and bashed in her skull."

"Accidentally, you mean?"

"It's still murder. I mean, if I show you a snake and you back away from it over the edge of a roof, that's homicide. No two ways of looking at it."

"Then a blowtorch *was* used on her?"

"No. Leastways, the lab boys don't think so. They found traces of turpentine on her dress and in her hair."

"Turpentine?"

"Yeah, highly inflammable, you know." He looked at me like a man with a knotty storyline problem. "Does it sound screwy to you, too?"

"It does, yes."

"I'm puzzled, so help me. Can you picture a guy throwing turps at her, and then lighting a match? What's to gain? Was he trying to ruin her good looks? If so, he must have known the turps wouldn't kill her. It's screwy as hell."

"Maybe the fire was an accident. Maybe she tripped over the turpentine or something. There's always a lot of turps back there, guys painting sets, you know."

"If she tripped over a can of the stuff, we'd have found traces on her stockings and shoes. She wasn't burned below the waist, you know. It figures somebody threw a bucket of it at her. But why?"

"I don't know." I studied Hilton for a moment, and then asked, "Why are you telling me all this, Sergeant?"

Hilton smiled, assuming the cop pose for just an instant. Then the pose vanished, and he was plain, honest Hilton again. "You smoke Pall Malls, Crane?"

"Yes," I said, puzzled.

"You told me yesterday that you were out in the hallway having a smoke when Miss Finch was killed. I rooted around out there and found a couple of dead butts on the floor. The place is probably a hangout for anyone who wants a breath of air from that window, and it probably gets swept up every day. Two of the butts were old ones, the lab boys said, probably missed by the sweeper. He makes his rounds about eleven, by the way. I asked him. Those two were off in the corner, so it's easy to see how they could be lying there for a long time. The third butt was right under the window, and it was a Pall Mall. The lab boys told me the tobacco was reasonably fresh, and that the cigarette could have been recently smoked. They also got a lot of smeared prints from it, and one good thumb print. The thumb print matched yours."

"Mine? Where'd you get my thumb print?"

Hilton smiled. "The picture I

showed you this morning. You left a nice one on the glossy surface."

I smiled with him, wagging my head. "I'll be damned."

"So I figured maybe you, out of all the jokers around, were telling the truth. I know a cigarette butt is flimsy enough evidence, and it sure as hell wouldn't whitewash a man in court."

"Then why whitewash me, Hilton?" I asked.

"We're not in court, Crane. Nor do I figure you for a crazy guy who'd set a woman on fire. I may not be able to pull a killer out of a hat, but I've seen enough of them to know when a man *isn't* one."

"Well, thanks."

"Besides, I need someone who knows all these people. The minute I step in, they clam up, even if they're not guilty. Homicide has a way of making everyone feel like he did it. I need someone who can sniff around when they're all off guard."

"Me?"

"If you'll help."

"You're pretty sure I didn't kill her, huh?"

"Reasonably so. What do you say, Crane?"

"Sure, if you think I really can help. Where do I start?"

"Just listen around," he said, "and let me know what you hear."

I told him then about Dave's confession, and he listened with interest, making no comment. Then I told him about the phone call Andy had received, and he listened to this with more interest, and then said, "That can mean something. If she remembers. Trouble is, the remark was probably significant only to the killer. It probably doesn't mean a damn to Miss Mann."

"At least we know the killer was a man."

"There were no women in the studio anyway," Hilton said.

"No, there weren't."

"Or at least none that we know of." Hilton finished his coffee, and then said, "I'm going to have a talk with Miss Mann. Maybe I can dig something out of her. You'll get what you can here, okay, Crane?"

"I'll do my best," I assured him.

7.

I was kept pretty busy during the rehearsal, and I didn't get much opportunity to ask many questions. When Dave finally called a break, I walked out into the darkness and took a seat near the monitor, lighting a cigarette before someone called me for another script change. I was seated for about six minutes when Martha Findlay came over to me. Martha was young Cadet Holmes' mother, a woman who'd been deserted when the Cadet was six years old. Her husband had been an alcoholic with an itchy foot, and he'd just picked up and wandered off one morning, heading for South America way. Martha was an attractive, large brunette. She'd started the Cadet off on dancing lessons, and then

dumped him into that private hell of the child entertainer, exhibiting his soft-shoe and tap routines at American Legion dances and one-night stands wherever the opportunity presented itself. With Martha Findlay at the helm, the opportunities presented themselves with blinding rapidity. She was shrewd enough to realize that tap dancers were a dime a dozen, though, and so she'd started the young Cadet on dramatics lessons. He'd done a few scattered television spots before landing the Cadet Holmes plum, and I had to admit the kid was pretty good — but I still wondered whether or not Martha hadn't done a little entertainment of her own to get him the most coveted juvenile spot on the air. Alec Norris, the producer who'd originated the show, and the man who'd preceded old Felix Nechler, had a notorious reputation with the women, and Martha Findlay — if nothing else — was a good deal of woman.

She brought all her womanhood over to me, and plunked it down in the chair next to me. Martha affected dresses which would have warranted a raid on Fifty-Second street, and she wore them with the casual aloofness of a woman who is above thinking about her body. When Martha Findlay was within viewing distance, however, there was hardly a man from six to sixty-six who was not aware of her body. She leaned over purposefully, crossing her legs, and cupping her chin in her hand. I did not look down to her but the temptation was a very strong one, and the nearness of her perfume didn't help the situation any.

"I've been meaning to talk to you, Jon," she said, her voice soft. It always surprised me to hear that soft voice coming from Martha's overabundant body. But the voice was just a small part of the femininity that was as calculated as an IBM card.

"Really? What about, Martha?"

"About Richie."

Richie, of course, was Richard Findlay, and Richard Findlay was young Cadet Holmes. "What about him?"

"Well, now that Cynthia is gone . . ." Martha paused, moving her hand away from her chin for a moment, allowing me a better look at what the front of her dress had artfully uncovered. She brought the hand back like the President of the Censorship Committee, and then said, "I know it's terrible and all, but I never could talk to her about Richie, and perhaps you can help."

"How, Martha?"

"Fatter parts," she said bluntly.

"This is *Marauder's* show," I said, just as bluntly. "Cadet Holmes is just a supporting character."

"I know. I was thinking, though . . ." She hesitated, and then smiled, lowering her lashes at the same time. And even though I saw completely through Martha Findlay, there was one portion of my mind that re-

mained acutely aware of her as a very desirable woman — if you like big women. "I had an idea, Jon. Suppose Fred — suppose *Marauder* were captured or something. You could easily handle that, I know. Or perhaps wound him, something like that. Then Richie would have to carry the ball, don't you see? He'd have to hunt for his old friend, thwart the villains, all that. It would give him a nice opportunity to show what he can really do. He's quite good, you know."

"What does *Marauder* do when I write him out of the script? Fred Folsom makes his living from this show."

"Oh, I know," Martha said innocently, "and I wouldn't think of cutting Fred out of his salary. We could have a few shots of him in prison or something like that, just to point up the drama. He'd still be in the show that way, and drawing his usual salary. And it would only take two weeks or so. Just enough time to show everyone what Richie can really do."

"Richie's doing fine," I said.

"It's much easier to talk to you than it was to Cynthia, Jon," she said. Her voice lowered intimately. "Think about it. Maybe we can discuss it further over a few drinks."

"You're the biggest phony in the world, Martha," I said.

"Jon!" She squeezed her eyes shut in mock, amused shock. "Really now!"

"Luckily, you've got the equipment." I paused. "You really want to have a few drinks with me, Martha?"

"I'd love to," she said earnestly, eagerly.

"Even when I tell you I've quit *Rocketeers* and won't be doing the scripts anymore?"

Martha's eyelashes batted in honest amazement. "You . . . you quit?"

"Yes, dearest."

"I . . . see." It took Martha only a moment to regain her composure, and then the shrewdly calculating mind beneath the softly shrewd exterior shoved through again. "Do you have any idea who'll be taking over, Jon?"

I patted Martha on her well-shaped knee. "No, darling. I don't. But about those drinks . . ."

"I think Dave is calling Richie now," she said, standing and smiling and sucking in a deep dress-filling breath all at the same time. "You will excuse me, won't you, Jon?"

She swiveled off before I could answer, and I chuckled secretly, wondering just who would fill in the script-writing gap I'd be leaving. And then I started wondering just why I was leaving. Now that Cynthia was dead, there would be no arguments over the quality level of the scripts. I could go right on writing adventurous space opera, providing the next producer of *Rocketeers* wasn't as equally eager-beaverish as Cynthia had been.

This was a point worth considering. If *I* was relieved — and I must

admit I felt no guilt about the feeling of relief — imagine how the murderer felt! Assuming, of course, that the murderer had also been harassed by Cynthia, plagued as it were into finally killing her. But assuming this, it simply remained a job of finding whom Cynthia had been riding hardest.

Dave Halliday? True, as director of the show he'd had to take an unwarranted amount of lip garbage from his ex-wife, a fact he'd skillfully concealed until just today. But considering the fact that she *was* his ex-wife . . . Or had Dave planted that bit of information purposely? Had he mentioned it to throw suspicion off himself? The possibility was worth a second thought.

Stu Shaughnessy? Again, he'd taken his share of abuse from Cynthia Finch. No part of a show she produced was immune to her probing, correcting eye. Stu was the kind of workman who took pride in everything he did, and if Cynthia possessed any one outstanding quality, it was the ability to demolish a man's pride.

Felix Nechler? The old man had come back to ask Cynthia for a job, or so he said. Perhaps he'd come back to do her out of a job, leaving the old producing spot open again. Who'd be better qualified for the vacant position than a man who'd produced the show before? And it was certainly not news that Felix Nechler was not exactly in love with Cynthia.

Marauder? Somehow, I couldn't picture Fred Folsom as a murderer. Besides, if Andy's phone-call story were to be taken into account, both Folsom and young Cadet were out of the picture. Neither of the two had seen her or spoken to her on the day of Cynthia's death.

That left Artie Schaefer, who'd dated Cynthia and who seemed extremely fond of her. It also left anyone else who'd been lurking around the studio unseen.

It left a lot.

Just before show time that afternoon, Dave dumped a fat prop problem in Stu Shaughnessy's lap, and Stu was busy right up to ON THE AIR, trying to rig a weird looking Martian animal that would run across the stage apparently on its own power. It kept him hopping, but he came up with a papier-mâché horror propelled by wheels and wires, and Dave was beaming happily just before *Rocketeers* hit the screen. I didn't stay for the show. I never did. Rehearsals always knocked hell out of me, and I'm not the type who gets any particular enjoyment out of watching my own work — especially when it's been changed so much by viewing time that it hardly resembles the original.

I stopped at *Hutton's* for a few martinis and a couple of broiled pork chops, and then drifted up toward Fifth Avenue, watching the pretty ladies in their pretty mink stoles. I walked on Fifth for a while, dismayed when I realized I'd never

find a phone booth among the jewelry shops and clothing stores. I turned up 47th Street and then walked up to Sixth, stopping in the first cigar store I found.

I dialed Andy's number and let the phone ring eight times. When she didn't answer, I figured she was in the shower, and I debated whether or not I should hop a cab over and surprise her. I decided against it. I hung up, walked to Broadway, and stopped in one of the penny arcades, trying my luck with the skill-testing machines. I scored three runs at baseball, shot down 39 enemy bombers and got a fortune teller's card reading *You are good with your hands and should concentrate your activities on manual skills.* I chuckled a little and then watched the guy behind the phony newspaper concession. I finally had him print a headline which read ANDREA MANN ASSAULT VICTIM, paid him, and took the newspaper outside, matching it to a same-sized tabloid I found at the nearest newsstand. I slipped the first page onto the tabloid, and then found another phone and dialed Andy's number again.

This time I let it ring for long after I ran out of fingers on both hands. Andy's a very quick girl in the shower, and I began to wonder just where the hell she was, or what the hell she was doing. I folded the tabloid, put it under my arm, and caught a cab. When I reached her brownstone on East 68th Street, I paid and tipped the cabbie, and then climbed the steps rapidly. I didn't bother ringing the downstairs bell, I went straight up to the third floor. knocked on the door, and waited.

I knocked again.

"Andy!" I yelled.

I pounded on the door this time, using a closed fist, and then I tried the knob. The door opened easily, and that was when I felt the first touch of panic. In all the time I'd known Andrea Mann, she'd never left her door unlocked, even when someone was in the apartment with her.

The living room was empty. A desolate-looking, pom-pommed house-slipper lay on its side near the television console. The set was still tuned to the channel that carried *Rocketeers* earlier that evening, but the name comedian who filled the screen was playing to an empty house. I looked into the kitchen and found a cork-tipped cigarette burnt down to an ash in the tray where Andy had left it. That was when I ran into the bedroom.

8.

It was empty, as empty as a tilted beer keg at two in the morning. The bedcovers were pulled back neatly, and I figured Andy had been watching television for a while, planning to hit the sack early. A closed book rested on the night table alongside the bed.

The closet door was open, and something — probably an overcoat

— had been ripped so violently from its hanger that the surrounding garments were all lying in a disconsolate heap on the closet floor.

Andy's slip, brassiere, panties, and stockings were draped over the back of a chair near the closet wall. Her purse was on the dresser. I knew then that she'd been *taken* from the apartment, and hadn't left of her own accord. She'd probably been in pajamas or a night gown, and her abductor had thrown her into an overcoat and then forced her to accompany him. I didn't waste any more time theorizing.

I went back into the living room and quickly dialed Homicide, and when Detective-Sergeant Hilton came on the wire, I told him what I'd found.

"All right," he said, "don't get excited. I'll get an APB out on this right away, and we may be able to pick them up before they get very far. In the meantime, this may be the best break we've had yet."

"How do you mean?" I asked, hardly able to think of Andy's abduction as a "break."

"Tomorrow's Friday," he said. "You've got a show on Friday, haven't you?"

"Yes. But . . ."

"Whoever grabbed Miss Mann may figure it's not safe to leave her alone. He may stick with her tomorrow, and then all we have to do is count heads at the studio. The missing guy is our man."

"Except for one thing," I said.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Suppose he kills her first?"

"If he was going to kill her, why snatch her? He could have done it right in her apartment."

"Maybe he's working up the courage."

"That's the chance we have to take. Meanwhile, I'll get an I sheet out on her, and maybe one of the radio cars will spot her. Whatever you do, don't start worrying, Jon."

"All right," I promised. "Did you talk to her this afternoon?"

"Yes. She told me just what she'd told you — but she couldn't remember anything pertinent that was said."

"Then whoever grabbed her did it all for nothing."

"Not anymore. She'll sure as hell know who the guy is now."

"Then he'll *have* to kill her," I said.

"Maybe not. Maybe . . ."

"Don't snow me," I said. "I'm a big boy now."

"All right, all right. Maybe he will. Chances are we'll get to him first. Like I said, if his mind was already made up he'd have killed her already. Maybe he's squeamish about taking another life."

"Or maybe he's taking her out to the country where he can do the job properly," I said miserably.

"You start worrying," Hilton said, "and you can dream up all kinds of junk. Just keep cool. If he stalls until tomorrow and doesn't show up the rest is duck soup."

"*If* he stalls," I said.

"He might. Jon, we'll be doing everything we can."

"All right," I said.

"I'll keep in touch with you."

"All right."

"Now don't start worrying all over the place."

"I won't," I lied.

"Give it 'til tomorrow."

"Sure. Sure."

We gave it 'til tomorrow. None of the alerted policemen spotted anyone filling the description on the I sheet, so we waited until rehearsal time the next day. Dave Halliday showed up first, and Stu Shaughnessy walked in about ten minutes later. The Cadet and *Marauder* came in shortly after that. Felix Nechler was checked on, and he was reported being on the floor of Macy's furniture department where he'd been selling sofa-beds ever since he lost the producing job.

We went through the rehearsal, and by show time that night there was only one man who hadn't showed up for his job.

Artie Schaefer.

We didn't know at the time that he was lying dead in his apartment, an ice pick sticking out of his chest.

9.

I went along with Hilton because we figured this was the showdown, and I wanted to be the first to put my arms around Andy after we wrapped up Schaefer.

He was not a pretty sight to see, unless you like looking at dead men. The ice pick made hardly any blood at all, and perhaps that's what made it harder to believe he was actually dead. It stuck up out of his chest at a grotesque angle, and a tiny trickle of crimson flowed from the tiny hole. He'd been a handsome man, Artie Schaefer, but the good looks had turned waxy and false in death, and he looked like a caricature of himself. I looked down at him, and then I turned away, a hard lump in my throat. If the killer had murdered Artie, then I was sure Andy was already dead.

This was not the showdown we'd expected. This only complicated things, and the murderer was still running around loose somewhere.

"Why don't you just round them all up?" I said to Hilton. "You know it's one of them. Why don't you arrest them all and beat the truth out of them?"

"I may," Hilton said. "Even if it means risking a pile of false arrest charges."

"What about Andy now?" I said. "He's sure to kill her now. He's killed twice already. For God's sake, Hilton . . ."

"There's no figuring the homicidal mind, Jon," Hilton said. "You can't establish any sort of pattern for these goddamned things. Look, he may have killed Cynthia for what seemed like a good reason. He may have killed Schaefer here for what seemed to him like an equally good

reason. That doesn't mean he'll kill your Andy. It doesn't mean that at all. Maybe he hasn't got a strong enough reason for killing her yet. Maybe he's still debating it."

"He's killed two already," I almost shouted.

"That doesn't mean he'll kill three. That's a common fallacy, Jon. Everybody figures the first one is the hardest. After that, killing comes easy. It isn't true. The first one is really the easiest. It's usually done in rage, and it's all over before you know what happened. It's the ones after that which are difficult. It's those that are usually planned and committed cold-bloodedly. It's those that make the murderer realize he is actually doing murder. Those are the tough ones, Jon."

"All this talk . . ."

"I'm just trying to explain something to you. He may have already killed your Andy — but he may not have. We've had guys who've killed ten, twelve people. And then they'll walk into headquarters one day and confess. They just couldn't kill any more. Look at . . ."

"All right," I said. "All right."

"I'm going back to the office," Hilton said, "as soon as the boys finish with their pictures and prints here. I'm expecting an autopsy report on Cynthia Finch. If anything turns up, I'll call you. I suggest you go home and get some sleep."

I tried to do that. I went home, and I got into bed and turned out the lights, and then I lay on my back and stared up at the ceiling, and all the while I was thinking of Andy and wondering if she was still alive. You get so you take someone like Andy for granted. Like brushing your teeth in the morning. Like that. Andy was a nice kid, a lot of fun, a sweet girl. Only that.

Until now. And now I began to wonder how much more she really meant to me, now when it was perhaps too late.

When the phone rang, I leaped out of bed and ran into the living room, catching it on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Jon?"

"Yes."

"This is George." He paused and added, "Sergeant Hilton."

"Oh yes, yes."

"Something interesting," he said.

"Have you found Andy?"

"No, Jon."

"Oh."

"But this autopsy on Cynthia Finch. It gives us something to work on anyway."

"What have you got?"

"She was pregnant, Jon. Three months."

"What?"

"That's the story. Now maybe we've got a motive."

"Cynthia pregnant! I mean . . ."

"That's the trouble with homicide," Hilton said. "You start rooting around, and all the muck comes up. All the nice conventions are broken. There isn't a person alive without that skeleton in his closet,

Jon, and homicide brings it out and rattles the bones a little. But like I say, this may give us our motive."

"Artie Schaefer was dating her," I said automatically. "Do you suppose . . ."

"He told me that, and when I got this report it was the first thing that popped into my head. It's a shame he was killed with that icepick. Suicide would have fit the picture better."

"How so?"

"Killed her because she was carrying his unwanted child, and then knocked himself off because he felt guilty as hell."

"Why couldn't he have killed himself with the icepick?" I asked.

"Because no prints were on the handle. A dead man doesn't get up and wipe his prints off the murder weapon."

"I suppose not," I said glumly, not seeing how the autopsy report had brought us any closer to finding Andy.

"We're still working on it," Hilton said. "Don't worry."

"No," I said. Then I said goodbye and hung up. I tried the bed, but my pajamas seemed too tight, and the bed seemed too small, and the room seemed suffocatingly hot. I got up and walked into the living room, snapping on an end-table lamp. I debated putting on the *Late Show*, decided against it, and mixed myself a very stiff whiskey sour instead. I ate the cherry and chewed the slice of orange, and then I mixed another one, minus the fruit cocktail this time.

I was sitting down again, ready to drink myself to sleep dead blind when the doorbell chimes sounded.

I said, "Oh, hell," and shoved myself up out of the chair. I walked to the door, and shouted, "Who is it?"

"Just me," the voice answered softly. I'd have recognized that voice through the door of a bank vault. I opened the door on the smiling face and half-clothed body of Martha Findlay.

10.

"Hello, dearest," she said, breezing past me into the foyer. I got a whiff of her breath, and the aroma wasn't *Eau de Cologne*. It was more like Vat 69, and I'd have to demolish a good many whiskey sours before I came anywhere near Martha's lofty position on cloud nine. She walked directly to the liquor cabinet, rooted around among the bottles for a while and came up with a full fifth of bourbon. She broke the seal expertly, poured a water glass half full and then plopped down onto the sofa.

"I'm happy as hell," she announced.

"I can see that."

"I put the little louse to bed early," she explained, "and I've been pedaling from bar to bar." She looked around fuzzily. "What bar is this, darling?"

"Why don't you go home, Martha?" I said.

"Home? The party's just started. Tomorrow's Saturday. No goddamn show, no goddamn noses to wipe. Brother, this is my night to foul."

"Howl."

"Foul. I'm not that drunk."

"What brought you here, Martha?"

Martha did a disappearing liquid act with the bourbon in her glass, and then filled the glass again. "You, darling," she said.

"I know I'm irresistible, but . . ."

"You're no more irresistible than any other jerk in town, except you own a typewriter. Even that doesn't make you different than the rest."

"What does?"

"You write *Rocketeers.*"

"I told you . . ."

"I'm not as stupid as I look, Jon," Martha said.

"I never thought you looked stupid, Martha."

"Are those pajamas you're wearing?" she asked, as if noticing them for the first time.

"Yes."

She lifted one eyebrow. "How cosy."

"How."

"I got to thinking, Jon. I sniffed around and found out why you were leaving the show. With Cynthia dead, you won't have to leave it any more. You've been writing it since B.C., and you can go on writing it just the way you like."

"I'm still leaving, I think."

"You won't leave. *Rocketeers* is in your blood. If you went over to *Captain Jet*, you wouldn't be able to sleep nights."

"I can't sleep nights, now, anyway."

Martha Findlay grinned recklessly. "Have you tried a hot water bottle?"

"I've got an electric blanket, thanks."

She stood up suddenly, smoothing her skirt over her wide hips. "You're being dumb, Jon, real dumb. I'm not exactly ready for the glue works."

"No one said you were."

"Damn right, no one said it. They'd have to be blind to say it."

"Martha, why don't you go home? I've got enough headaches without worrying about your son's career."

"You think *I'm* worrying about my son's career? You think that's it?"

"Well, you don't leave much choice."

"I'm worrying about one little number, and that number is pretty big, and that number is Martha Findlay. That's who I'm worrying about. Look, Jon, let's face it. I've got a lot of it now, all in trumps. I'm not going to have it forever, like the diamonds song says, and pretty soon that brat'll grow up and take unto himself a spouse. That leaves Martha Findlay with a figure like a hippo, and a son with another woman to worry about. There's nothing worse than a big girl who turns to fat, believe me."

"You're not turning yet," I said, truthfully.

"I know. Give it time. That's why I want Richie to hit the gravy train now, when I can still get something out of it. It's been no picnic raising him alone, believe me. I'll be damned if his wife is going to get all the dessert. Where's that bourbon?"

She poured herself another glassful, trying to recapture the wearing-thin edge of her stupor. She swallowed that, and then poured and consumed another glassful, and I expected her to fall flat on her face. She didn't. The two glasses hit her like a ton of nitro, and her eyes glazed, and her tongue thickened, but all she did was stagger towards me and throw her arms around my neck.

"That's why you're being silly, Jon baby. Very silly. That's why you are."

"Why, Martha?"

"Because all you got to do is give the show to Richie for two weeks or so, even a week or so, that's all, Jon baby, that's all. And then Martha Findlay shows her gratitude. Jon, I'm the most gratuitous girl in town."

"I can imagine," I said, holding back a smile.

"It's no skin off your nose, and Jon honey, would I be grateful? I'll be more grateful than you can possibly imagine, Jon sweetie."

"Martha, go home. You're loaded and you don't know what the hell you're offering."

"I don't, huh? I don't, huh? I know damn well what I'm offering, Mr. Crane. Maybe you don't know what I'm offering, huh? Hey, maybe that's it." Her hands roamed up the front of her blouse and stopped near the top button.

"Save that for when you're home," I said. "Come on, Martha let's call it a night."

"I think I'll stay," she said. "You need convincing."

"I think you'll go, honey."

"I shoulda got married again," she said morosely.

"You should have."

"Like Cynthia. She was the smart one, all right."

"Sure," I said, "like Cynthia. Come on, honey." I started steering her toward the door, and then she said, "Cynthia knew, by God, she knew it was best being married."

"Sure," I said. "Sure, sure."

"And then she got killed. Damn shame, even if I didn't like her."

"That's the way it goes," I said. I was at the door now, with Martha's elbow cupped in my hand. I started to unlock the door, and she whirled away from me.

"Is that right? Is it right she should get killed so close to her wedding?"

"What wedding?" I asked.

"Her wedding! For God's sake, you stupid or something?"

"Yes, Martha, I'm stupid. Goodnight, doll."

I opened the door, ready to shove her out in the hallway. She slammed the door shut and leaned against it, and then bent forward conspiratorially.

"She was gonna get married. Yes, Cynthia. Yes, little Cynthia. You didn't know that, did you? You're a bigshot writer, but you didn't know that."

"No, I didn't," I said slowly.

"Well, she was. So there." Martha opened the door. "G'night, hard man. You'll regret this someday."

This time, I slammed the door.

"What do you mean, she was going to get married?"

"She was. Cynthia. She told me herself. Only thing she wouldn't talk with me was business."

"When? When was she going to get married?"

"A few weeks. I forget the exact date."

"To whom?"

"Who? I don't know." Martha turned and fiddled with the door knob again. I grabbed her shoulder and spun her around, and she looked up and said, "You changing your mind, Jonny?"

"No. Who was Cynthia going to marry?"

"She didn't say," Martha answered. "Hey, why're you so interested, huh? How come you're so . . ."

"You're sure she didn't say?"

"I ought to know what she said, oughtn't I? To know?"

"Was it Artie Schaefer?"

"She didn't say, I told you. What do I have to do to . . ."

"Did she tell you anything about him?"

"Only that he was the sweetest, kindest, nicest man in the whole world."

"That helps," I said.

"Am I staying or going, Mr. Crane? If I stay, I want something comfortable to get into. If I'm going, the night is young, and tomorrow's Saturday."

"You're going, honey."

"Which shows all you know about women. Well, g'night, sucker."

She opened the door, and this time I didn't stop her. She closed it behind her, and I heard the click of her high heels down the corridor outside, and then the whine of the elevator as it started up the shaft.

Cynthia was going to get married!

And Cynthia was pregnant.

And now Cynthia was dead.

And so was Artie Schaefer.

And somewhere in that quatrain, there was meaning. Somewhere in it, but I didn't know where. I mixed another whiskey sour, and I drank it slowly, trying to figure it all out, trying to see between the lines of the quatrain. The lines kept blurring because Andy's face was hidden behind them, and Andy fit into the picture somewhere, too.

Had the killer mentioned his wedding plans to Andy? Or had it been the killer whom Cynthia had planned to marry? Why couldn't it have been Artie Schaefer, or even Joe Shmoe who worked at a popcorn stand on Second Avenue? Why couldn't it have been anyone, a boy back home, a cameramen, a sponsor, an anybody, or a nobody?

That was just it. It *could* have been anyone.

I finally fell asleep.

II.

I woke up with ideas, and the ideas seemed so simple that I kicked myself around for not having thought of them before. I called Detective-Sergeant George Hilton even before I got out of my pajamas.

The first thing I said was, "Anything on Andy yet?"

"No, but we're still working," Hilton said.

"Well look, George, I've had a few ideas. Stop me if I'm wrong."

"Go ahead."

"First, there were a lot of cameramen in the studio the day Cynthia Finch was killed. I thought . . ."

"We checked on every one of them, Jon. Three all told. At the time of her death they were all in a nearby neighborhood drugstore plotting camera angles for the evening show."

"I see. Well, one other idea. Andy was snatched on Thursday, but she was snatched either while *Rocketeers* was on the air, or shortly thereafter. I know because I called her right after leaving the studio."

"Yeah?"

"Well, everyone connected with the show was at the studio when she was grabbed. I don't know about Felix Nechler, but . . ."

"Thursday is a late night at Macy's," Hilton said, "and Nechler hasn't missed a day's work since this all started."

"All right, that's my point. It figures that the murderer had someone kidnap Andy. I mean, he didn't do it himself. That will explain why everyone was right on the job Friday. There was no necessity to stand guard over Andy. Someone was doing that for the murderer."

"You've got something there, Jon."

"Well, today is Saturday. No one has to report to the studio, least of all the murderer. He's probably stayed away from Andy up to now, which is why she hasn't turned up floating in the river. But now he's free. He's got today and tomorrow to do whatever the hell he plans on doing, and when he reports to work Monday, no one will be the wiser. You follow me, George?"

"I'm with you. You mean if he's going to kill her, he'll do it over the weekend."

"Right."

"That means we have to work fast. The damn trouble is . . ."

"No leads."

"No leads. There wasn't a clue anywhere in her apartment."

"I'm going to take a run down to the studio, George. Maybe I can dig up something there."

"We've covered it pretty thoroughly, but if you feel . . ."

"I want to try."

"Okay, Jon. Good luck. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks. So long, George."

I hung up and then got into some street clothing after washing and shaving. I was knotting my tie when the phone rang. I left the tie hanging around my neck loose, walked into the living room, picked the phone from its cradle, and said, "Jonathan Crane."

"Jon, I have to make this fast." The voice was a whisper, but it couldn't have been anyone else.

"Andy! Andy, are you all right?"

"Jon, I know who it is. I remembered."

There was the sound of a band behind her, brasses blasting, a bass drum pounding. She was speaking in a whisper, and I could hardly hear her over the noise of the radio.

"Andy, where are you?"

The band got louder, as if someone had suddenly turned up the volume on the radio. Andy said something in a whisper, but all I heard was, "It's . . ." and then her voice was drowned out by the brasses.

"Who?" I shouted. "Andy, where are you?"

"I know it was him," she whispered, "because he said, 'In a little while, she'll be taking the orders from me.' " The noise of the band was receding again, and I wished whoever was fiddling with the radio would cut it out. "I didn't know what he meant, and he smiled and said, 'The bells are ringing, baby' and I still didn't know what he meant. But they were probably going to get married, Jon. And then . . ."

"Andy, who? And where are you? Baby, where . . ."

"I'm . . ."

And then there was a click on the line, and a silence as deep as the Atlantic Ocean.

"Andy!" I shouted.

I began jiggling the hook, and when the operator came on, I said, "Operator, can you trace that phone call, please?"

"I'm sorry, sir," she answered automatically. "We are not permitted . . ."

"Goddammit, this is a matter of life and death."

"I'm sorry, sir. Regulations do not permit . . ."

"Oh, hell!" I shouted, and I slammed down the receiver. I picked it up again instantly, and dialed Homicide after what seemed like an eternity waiting for a dial tone. When Hilton came on, I said, "George, Andy just called me."

"What? Where is she?"

"She didn't say. Someone cut her off. Hey, what the hell is this?"

I had just become aware of the brasses and bass drums on the other end of the line. They kept getting louder until they filled the phone, and I shouted, "For Christ's sake, turn down that radio."

"I can't," Hilton said. "It's not a radio."

"What the hell is it then?"

"A band. Outside my window. A parade, Jon."

"A par . . . George! *That band was behind Andy when she called!*"

"What? When was this?"

"Two, three minutes ago. Which way is the parade going?"

"Downtown. I want to get on this right away, Jon. I'll get every damn radio car in the city."

"Go ahead. She knows who it is, George. The guy who was going to marry Cynthia. She knows who."

"What guy? What marriage? What are you talking about?"

"Go get Andy. I'm heading for the studio. I'll call you in a half hour. George . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Find her. Please."

"I will," he promised, and then he hung up, and I visualized him tracing the parade's progress back two or three minutes and knocking on every damned door in the vicinity. There was nothing I could do to help, and I couldn't sit still anyway. I tied my tie and then left the apartment, catching a cab and heading for the studio.

The watchman let me in when he recognized me, and I took the iron steps up to the third floor. The studio was in darkness. I switched on one light, and then stood in the center of the concrete floor, wondering where to begin, wondering how I'd find what I was looking for.

The cameras stood around like silent robots. The overhead mikes dangled from the ceiling on thin wires. I walked onto the Martian set, the weird plants casting long irregular shadows on the concrete. My shoes padded silently on the Martian sands, and then I was walking past Earth Control Office, and back to the room where Stu Shaughnessy kept his props, and then over to the brick wall where the flats were stacked, and the concrete stretch of floor upon which I'd found Cynthia Finch.

There was still a brownish-red smear on the floor, where her head had rested.

I tried to picture it. I tried to visualize it happening, tried to reconstruct it. She'd gone to Stu's prop room first, so I walked back past the flats, and into the prop room, turning on the overhead bulb. The props were arranged neatly on the table top. Oxygen masks, the death-ray guns, the space projector, the wind guide, all of them, all the phony accoutrements that went into *Rocketeers*. Alongside the props was a can of turpentine, and alongside that an open bucket of the stuff, with two paint brushes stuck into it.

I picked up one of the death-ray guns. It had a heavy plastic handle, probably loaded with lead to give the gun a proper balance. I squeezed the trigger. I heard the flint catch, and then the spark clicked in the open breach, and then the other sparks came from the nozzle of the gun, while the entire weapon glowed from the light generated by the batteries inside.

Cynthia Finch had been holding one of these guns when she died.

Dave Halliday had left her talking to Stu Shaughnessy. Stu had been

showing her how the gun operated. I tried to picture the scene. How do you show someone how something operates?

There were two death-ray guns.

Could Stu Shaughnessy have been holding the second gun?

Could he have said something like, "You hold it this way, Cynthia, and then you squeeze the trigger?"

Could they have been standing near the prop table? Could there have been an open bucket of turps on it, just the way there was now?

And could Cynthia Finch have said, "I'm pregnant, Stu. And the baby's not yours?"

I saw it clearly then, sharply, as if I were watching it on the monitor, the image sharply defined in blacks and whites.

She told him, and he probably flew into a rage. He reached for the open bucket of turps, threw it in her face, wanting to hurt her in some way, but not wanting to kill her, wanting only to strike at her the way she had struck at him, wanting only to . . . to soil her perhaps, to cover her with the filth of an open turps bucket.

He threw the turpentine at her, and she probably drew back, the death-ray gun in her hand. And then she did instinctively what anyone with a gun in his hand would do when threatened with violence.

She squeezed the trigger.

She squeezed the trigger, and the flint snapped in the breach, and the spark came, and the spark ignited the turps that had drenched her woolen dress and her face.

She probably turned to run, fleeing down the dark passageway where the flats were stacked, seeking help.

And Stu had run after her, the second gun in his hand. He'd swung the gun and caught her on the back of her head with the heavy plastic handle. He'd picked up her gun where she'd dropped it, and then brought both guns together with the oxygen masks out to the set, giving the guns to the actors, hopelessly smearing any prints on them.

Stu Shaughnessy.

The man with pride in his work. Stu Shaughnessy, whom Cynthia had utterly and irrevocably destroyed by telling him she was bearing another man's child.

I hefted the death-ray gun on my palm.

Stu Shaughnessy. It fit. It fit it Andy corroborated it. It fit if he was the man Cynthia had promised to marry.

"What are you doing, Jon?" the voice asked.

I turned, lifting the gun unconsciously, instinctively, the way Cynthia must have done when the searing turps splashed into her face.

The gun that looked back at me was not made of plastic.

It did not shoot harmless little sparks.

It was big, and real, and it looked like a .45, and Stu Shaughnessy's hand was clasped tightly around the walnut stock.

12.

"Hello, Stu," I said.

"What are you doing, Jon?" he repeated. The light from the overhead bulb cast a brilliant reflection on his black-rimmed glasses. He looked very intense and very serious, and he held the big, blue-black .45 steady. "You know I don't like anyone in my prop room."

"I was just looking around," I said uneasily.

"For what?"

"Just looking."

"What'd you find?"

"Nothing. What's the gun for, Stu?"

"What'd you find, Jon?"

"Nothing, I said."

"The turpentine, maybe?"

"What turpentine?"

"The turpentine, Jon. Don't play dumb, Jon. I saw you holding hands with Hilton. Don't tell me the police haven't figured the turps angle yet."

"All right, they have," I said.

"Sure," Stu said, seriously. "That's why I'm here. As long as that blowtorch angle had them busy, the turps were safe. Besides, I couldn't take them out of the studio with everyone around. But I'll get rid of them now, and then I'd like to see them pin anything on me."

"It's too late for that, Stu. The police have probably found Andy by this time."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"So what? What good will it do when they find her? I didn't kidnap her. Someone else did. Someone I hired. Let them prove I was behind it."

"Kidnaping is a federal offense, Stu. Your stooge may not feel like riding it out alone."

Stu considered this for a moment, and his mouth tightened. "You shouldn't have come snooping around, Jon. This is a personal matter."

"You knew she was pregnant?"

"Yes," he almost shouted. I saw the gun hand waver, and I edged closer to the prop table, putting my hands flat on the table top behind me, putting down the plastic gun because I wanted both hands when I started my play. "Pregnant, that lousy cheat! Artie Schaefer's kid, Artie Schaefer who only dated her a few times. It speaks well for the morality of Cynthia Finch, doesn't it? I took care of him, too. I took care of him, all right."

"You did, Stu."

"She had the gall to tell it to me, just like that. Like exchanging pleasantries at breakfast. 'I'm pregnant, Stu. Will you marry me, anyway?' I married her, all right. I married her to fire and a dented skull, and then I got the guy who ruined it for me. It's too bad you came into this, Jon. It's too bad you and Andy . . ."

I reached for the bucket of turps, whipping it around with the open circle pointed toward Stu. I threw with all my might, and the brushes flopped out of the can, and the com-

mingled turpentine and paint splashed into Stu's face and eyes. He backed off screaming, the .45 going off once, twice, firing blindly into the walls of the small prop room.

And then my fist collided with his jaw, and the gun clattered to the concrete, and I hit him again just before he dropped down alongside the gun.

It was all over for Stu Shaughnessy.

13.

We sat together in the restaurant, the three of us. George Hilton looked peculiarly spruced in his dress-up clothes, and Andy looked wonderful, and I couldn't get enough looking at her.

"I don't understand," I said, "how you realized it was Stu. All right, even if you did know he was going to marry Cynthia . . ."

"The papers, silly," she said, squeezing my hand and smiling brightly. I wanted to kiss her right then and there, but I remembered George Hilton.

"What papers, doll?" I asked.

"The ones Charlie brought in. He was very nice, Charlie," Andy said. "I hope you won't go too hard on him. After all, he was just being paid for a job."

"Charlie is a kidnaper," George said, "no matter how you slice it."

"Still, he was very nice to me. Even when he caught me phoning you, Jon, he simply hung up and said, 'Did you tell him where you were?' And when I said I hadn't, he just warned me to stay away from the phone after that."

"As a matter of fact," George said, "he ripped the phone from the wall. When we got there, we found it that way."

"Yes," Andy said. "Charlie was very strong."

"I never knocked on so many doors in my life," George said, sighing.

"Well, thank you, sir," Andy said, smiling.

"About the papers," I prompted. "What papers?"

"The daily newspapers. It was Saturday's paper that carried the story about Cynthia having been pregnant."

"That's right," George said. "We released the story Friday night."

"Well, the minute I saw that, I went over the conversations again. That was when the wedding bells rang. It seemed like the only thing that made sense."

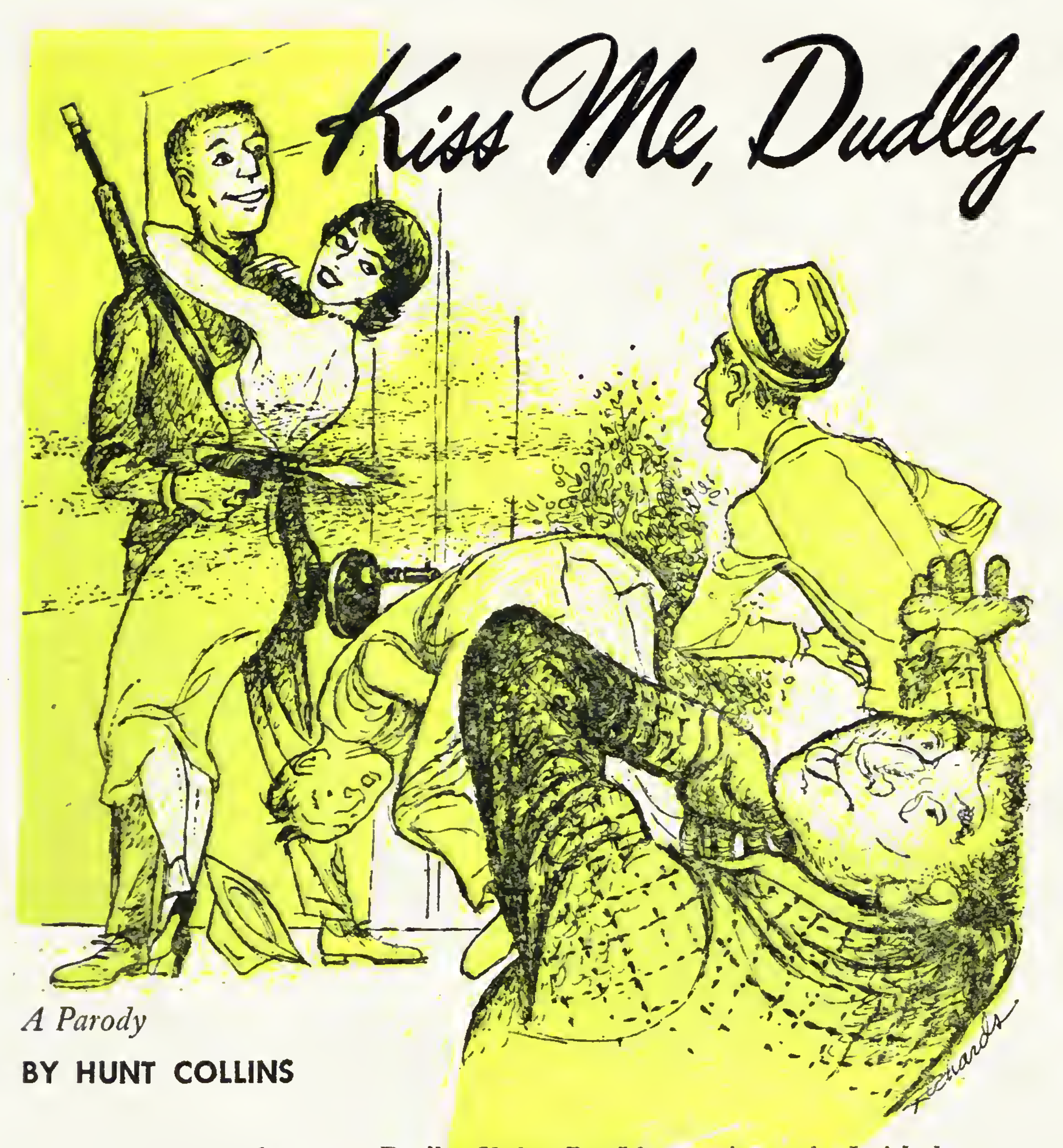
"Did you see this paper?" I asked, pulling out the phony headlines I'd had made in the penny arcade.

Andy looked at the bold black ANDREA MANN ASSAULT VICTIM, and then squealed, "Oh, you darling little prophet," and threw her arms around my neck.

George Hilton looked at the headline and said, "Huh?"

Andy took her mouth away from mine and winked at George. "Silly," she said, "he just proposed!"

Which I guess I had.



Kiss Me, Dudley

A Parody

BY HUNT COLLINS

Everybody was after me — Dudley Sledge. But I knew what to do. I picked up my machine gun and my hand grenades and my rifle and my brass knuckles . . .

SHE was cleaning fish by the kitchen sink when I climbed through the window, my .45 in my hand. She wore a low-cut apron, shadowed near the frilly top. When she saw me, her eyes went wide, and her lips parted, moist and full. I walked to the sink, and I picked up the fish by the tail, and I batted her over the eye with it.

"Darling," she murmured.

I gave her another shot with the fish, this time right over her nose. She came into my arms, and there

was ecstasy in her eyes, and her breath rushed against my throat. I shoved her away, and I swatted her full on the mouth. She shivered and came to me again. I held her close, and there was the odor of fish and seaweed about her. I inhaled deeply, savoring the taste. My father had been a sea captain.

"They're outside," I said, "all of them. And they're all after me. The whole stinking, dirty, rotten, crawling, filthy, obscene, disgusting mess of them. Me. Dudley Sledge. They've all got guns in their maggotty fists, and murder in their grimy eyes."

"They're rats," she said.

"And all because of you. They want me because I'm helping you."

"There's the money, too," she reminded me.

"Money?" I asked. "You think money means anything to them? You think they came all the way from Washington Heights for a lousy ten million bucks? Don't make me laugh." I laughed.

"What are we going to do, Dudley?"

"Do? Do? I'm going to go out there and cut them down like the unholy rats they are. When I get done, there'll be twenty-six less rats in the world, and the streets will be a cleaner place for our kids to play in."

"Oh, Dudley," she said.

"But first . . ."

The pulse in her throat began beating wildly. There was a hungry animal look in her eyes. She sucked in a deep breath and ran her hands over her hips, smoothing the apron. I went to her, and I cupped her chin in the palm of my left hand.

"Baby," I said.

Then I drew back my right fist and hit her on the mouth. She fell back against the sink, and I followed with a quick chop to the gut, and a fast uppercut to the jaw. She went down on the floor and she rolled around in the fish scales, and I thought of my sea captain father, and my mother who was a nice little lass from New England. And then I didn't think of anything but the blonde in my arms, and the .45 in my fist, and the twenty-six men outside, and the four shares of Consolidated I'd bought that afternoon, and the bet I'd made on the fight with One-Lamp Louie, and the defective brake lining on my Olds, and the bottle of rye in the bottom drawer of my file cabinet back at *Dudley Sledge, Investigations*.

I enjoyed it.

She had come to me less than a week ago.

Giselle, my pretty red-headed secretary, had swiveled into the office and said, "Dud, there's a woman to see you."

"Another one?" I asked.

"She looks distraught."

"Show her in."

She had walked into the office then, and my whole life had changed. I took one look at the blonde hair

piled high on her head. My eyes dropped to the clean sweep of her throat, to the figure filling out the green silk dress. When she lifted her green eyes to meet mine, I almost drowned in their fathomless depths. I gripped the desk top and asked, "Yes?"

"Mr. Sledge?"

"Yes."

"My name is Melinda Jones," she said.

"Yes, Miss Jones."

"Oh, please call me Agnes."

"Agnes?"

"Yes. All my friends call me Agnes. I . . . I was hoping we could be friends."

"What's your problem, Agnes?" I asked.

"My husband."

"He's giving you trouble?"

"Well, yes, in a way."

"Stepping out on you?"

"Well, no."

"What then?"

"Well, he's dead."

I sighed in relief. "Good," I said. "What's the problem?"

"He left me ten million dollars. Some of his friends think the money belongs to them. It's not fair, really. Just because they were in on the bank job. Percy . . ."

"Percy?"

"My husband. Percy *did* kill the bank guards, and it was he who crashed through the road block, injuring twelve policemen. The money *was* rightfully his."

"Of course," I said. "No doubt about it. And these scum want it?"

"Yes. Oh, Mr. Sledge, I need help so desperately. Please say you'll help me. Please, please. I beg you. I'll do anything, anything."

"Anything?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she wet her lips with a sharp, pink tongue. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper. "Anything," she said.

I belted her over the left eye.

That was the beginning, and now they were all outside, all twenty-six of them, waiting to close in, waiting to drop down like the venomous vultures they were. But they hadn't counted on the .45 in my fist, and they hadn't counted on the slow anger that had been building up inside me, boiling over like a black brew, filling my mind, filling my body, poisoning my liver and my bile, quickening my heart, putting a throb in my appendix, tightening the pectoral muscles on my chest, girding my loins. They hadn't counted on the kill lust that raged through my veins. They hadn't counted on the hammer that kept pounding one word over and over again in my skull: kill, kill, *kill!*

They were all outside waiting, and I had to get them. We were inside, and they knew it, so I did the only thing any sensible person would have done under the circumstances.

I set fire to the house.

I piled rags and empty crates and

furniture and fish in the basement, and then I soaked them with gasoline. I touched a match, and the flames leaped up, lapping at the wooden crossbeams, eating away at the undersides of the first-floor boards.

Melinda was close to me. I cupped her chin in one hand, and then tapped her lightly with the .45, just bruising her. We listened to the flames crackling in the basement, and I whispered, "That fish smells good."

And then all hell broke loose, just the way I had planned it. They stormed the house, twenty-six strong. I threw open the front door and I stood there with the .45 in my mitt, and I shouted, "Come on, you rats. Come and get it!"

Three men appeared on the walk and I fired low, and I fired fast. The first man took two in the stomach, and he bent over and died. The second man took two in the stomach, and he bent over and died, too. I hit the third man in the chest, and I swore as he died peacefully.

"Agnes," I yelled, "there's a submachine gun in the closet. Get it! And bring the hand grenades and the mortar shells."

"Yes, Dud," she murmured.

I kept firing. Three down, four down, five down. I reloaded, and they kept coming up the walk and I kept cutting them down. And then Melinda came back with the ammunition. I gathered up a batch of hand grenades, stuck four of them in my mouth and pulled the pins. I grabbed two in each hand and lobbed them out on the walk and six more of the rats were blown to their reward.

I watched the bodies come down to the pavement, and I took a quick count of arms and legs. It had been seven of the rats.

"Seven and five is thirteen," I told Melinda. "That leaves eleven more."

Melinda did some quick arithmetic. "Twelve more," she said.

I cut loose with the sub-machine gun. Kill, *kill*, my brain screamed. I swung it back and forth over the lawn, and they dropped like flies. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Nine more to go. Seventeen, eighteen, and they kept dying, and the blood ran red on the grass, and the flames licked at my back. They all ran for cover, and there was nothing to cut down, so I concentrated on a clump of weeds near the barn, shooting fast bursts into it. Pretty soon there were no more weeds, and the barn was a skeleton against the deepening dusk. I grabbed a mortar and tossed it into the yard, just for kicks. Pretty soon, there was no more barn.

Behind me, I heard Melinda scream. I whirled. Her clothes were aflame, and I seized her roughly and threw her to the floor. I almost lost my mind, and I almost forgot all about the nine guys still out there. I tore myself away from her, and I ran into the yard with two mortar

shells in my mouth, the sub-machine gun in my right hand, and the .45 in my left. I shook my head, and the mortar shells flew, and three more of the rats were dead and gone. I fired a burst with the machine gun, and another two dropped. There were four or five left now, and I picked them off one by one with the .45. The yard ran red with blood, and the bodies lay like twisted sticks. I sighed heavily and walked back to the house — because the worst part still lay ahead of me.

I found her in the bedroom.

She had taken a quick sponge bath, and her blody gleamed like dull ivory in the gathering darkness.

"All right, Agnes," I said. "It's all over."

"What do you mean, Dud?"

"The whole mess, Agnes. Everything, from start to finish. A big hoax. A big plot to sucker Dudley Sledge. Well, no one suckers Sledge. No one."

"I don't know what you mean, Dud."

"You don't know, huh? You don't know what I mean? I mean the phoney story about the bank job, and the ten million dollars your husband left you."

"He did leave it to me, Dudley."

"No, Agnes. That was all a lie. Every bit of it. I'm only sorry I had to kill twenty-six bird-watchers before I realized the truth."

"You're wrong, Dudley," she said. "Dead wrong."

"No, baby. I'm right, and that's the pity of it because I love you, and I know what I have to do now."

"Dudley . . ." she started.

"No, Agnes. Don't try to sway me. I know you stole that ten million from the Washington Avenue Bird Watchers Society. You invented that other story because you wanted someone with a gun, someone who would keep them away from you. Well, twenty-six people have paid . . . and now one more has to pay."

She clipped two earrings to her delicate ears, snapped a bracelet onto her wrist, dabbed some lipstick onto her wide mouth. She was fully dressed now, dressed the way she'd been that first time in my office, the first time I'd slugged her, the time I knew I was hopelessly in love with her.

She took a step toward me, and I raised the .45.

"Kiss me, Dudley," she said.

I kissed her, all right. I shot her right in the stomach.

She fell to the floor, a look of incredible ecstasy in her eyes, and when I turned around I realized she wasn't reaching for the mortar shell on the table behind me. Nor was she reaching for the sub-machine gun that rested in a corner near the table. She was reaching for the ten million bucks.

There were tears in my eyes. "I guess that's the least I can do for you, Agnes," I said. "It was what you wanted, even in death."

So I took the ten million bucks, and I bought a case of Irish whiskey.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

ERSKINE CALDWELL returns to *Manhunt* this month with another of his fine and realistic stories, *Epitaph*. Caldwell, of course, is the author of *God's Little Acre* and many other best-selling books and short stories, including his latest novel, *Love And Money*, which has received rave reviews from readers and critics alike. If you're waiting for your bookseller to order more copies of this fast-selling book, pass the time in reading *Epitaph*, as well as future Caldwell stories, in this magazine.



EVAN HUNTER, whose new complete novel, *The Death-Ray Gun*, appears in this issue, is now trying to reply to the hundreds of congratulatory telegrams, letters and calls which have been pouring in ever since the recent publication of his book, *The Blackboard Jungle*. Hunter's now waiting for the movie based on his book to appear, since M-G-M bought the film rights for $95,000. The movie's appearance will, of course, start the congratulations coming all over again. Other items, like the rave reviews for the book, have also kept him busy thanking people. In the meantime, Hunter's at work on a new book, and on some more stories for *Manhunt*.



HELEN NIELSEN is one of the prettiest writers in the detective field, but her stories are as hard-bitten as those of the most muscular male authors. She makes her debut in *Manhunt* this month with a story that proves the latter point: the wry and powerful *You Can't Trust A Man*. She's the author of many popular detective novels, including *Detour*, *Obit Delayed* and her latest, *The Woman On The Roof*. We agree with the *Saturday Review*, which called her one of the best writers in the field.



JOHN D. MACDONALD is an amazingly prolific young writer whose work is consistently rated at the top of the list. He's the author of *Cancel All Our Vows*, a serious novel, and the new *Contrary Pleasures* — and he's also written many top-notch crime and suspense novels which drew rave notices and phenomenal sales. His byline has appeared innumerable times in all of the top magazines, over a variety of short pieces which always bear the fresh, tough trademark of MacDonald's writing. His first story for *Manhunt*, *The Killer*, is right up there with MacDonald's best work. We'll be bringing you more of his fine stories soon.



HAL ELLSON's latest story, *Green Eyes*, is another completely different yarn from the author of *Duke*. The only similarity it bears to his previous *Manhunt* appearances is that it's a terrific story. ◆ RICHARD DEMING returns to *Manhunt* this month with an authentic and terrifying story about the Mafia, *The Blood Oath*. Manville Moon's tangled with some tough customers in his time, but he's never had to face a group like the Mafia before! ◆ JONATHAN CRAIG's documentaries continue to be widely popular, and his latest, *The Floater*, is one of the best and most realistic to date. ◆ HUNT COLLINS' stories are usually pretty grim and realistic, but he took an entirely different approach with *Kiss Me, Dudley*, which we're sure you'll find just as funny a parody as we do.



—Continued From Back Cover

YES, ALL SIX of these thrill-packed top-author mystery books are yours FREE on this amazing offer! Each is a *full-size, full-length* book, absolutely complete. A $15.00 value—but yours FREE on this sensational offer!

We make this liberal offer to introduce you to the many advantages of membership in the famous Detective Book Club.

The Best NEW Mysteries

300 or more new detective books come out every year. The Club selects the very "cream of the crop"—by top-notch authors like Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Mignon Eberhart, and Leslie Ford. ALL THESE, and many *other* famous authors have had their books selected by the Club. Many are members of the Club themselves!

Club selections are ALL newly published books. As a member, you get THREE of them *complete* in one handsome volume (a $6.00 to $7.50 value) for only $1.89. So you get THREE new mysteries FOR LESS THAN THE PRICE OF ONE!

Take ONLY The Books You Want

You do NOT have to take a volume every month. You receive a free copy of the Club's "Preview", which will fully describe all coming selections and you may reject any volume in advance. You need NOT take any specific number of books—only the ones you want. NO money in advance; NO membership fees. Cancel membership any time you please.

Enjoy These Five Advantages

(1) You get the cream of the finest BRAND-NEW detective books—by the best authors. (2) You save TWO-THIRDS the usual cost. (3) You take ONLY the books you want. (4) The volumes are fresh and clean—delivered right to your door. (5) They are so well printed and bound that they grow into a library you'll be proud to own.

SEND NO MONEY

Simply mail postcard promptly, and we will send you at once—FREE—the six complete new mystery thrillers described above, together with the current triple-volume containing three other complete new detective books.

DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
Roslyn, L. I., N. Y.

MAIL THIS POSTCARD NOW FOR YOUR SIX FREE BOOKS

•

NO POSTAGE NEEDED

ALL SIX BOOKS FREE — **SEND NO MONEY—JUST MAIL POSTCARD**

40

Walter J. Black, President
DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
Roslyn, L. I., N. Y.

PK

Please enroll me as a member and send me FREE, in regular publisher's editions, the SIX new full-length mystery novels pictured on this page. In addition send me the current triple-volume of the month, which contains three complete detective books.

I am not obligated to take any specific number of volumes. I am to receive an advance description of all forthcoming selections and I may reject any book before or after I receive it. I may cancel membership whenever I wish.

I need send no money now, but for each volume I decide to keep I will send you only $1.89 plus a few cents mailing charges as complete payment within one week after I receive it. *(Books shipped in U.S.A. only.)*

Mr.
Mrs. ....
Miss
(PLEASE PRINT PLAINLY)

Address ....

City.. Zone No. (if any).......... State..........................